

Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with **Magical Tools**

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Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Kei





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Summer Fete and Kraken Tape

The moon gave way to stars that blanketed the summer night sky. Nightfall brought a gentle breeze, blowing away the thick, humid air of the day. On the rooftop deck of the ivy-twined Green Tower, Dahlia and her friends set their gazes on the royal castle where it towered above the city. The backdrop was inkier and the twinkling dots more plentiful than on Earth. Of course, the fact that she was able to make that comparison meant that she had been reincarnated in this world.

As a magical toolmaker by trade, Dahlia Rossetti crafted tools for the common person's everyday life. To her right, staring silently at the stars, was Volfred Scalfarotto, the fourth son of an earl. The difference in social status between them should have meant that the two would have nothing to do with each other, yet, by way of a tangled web of coincidences, Dahlia and Volf had become good friends. His black hair and golden eyes, paired with that stunningly handsome face of his, were a curse and not a blessing.

"Is it almost here?" To Dahlia's left, the red-haired Irma Nuvolari was shifting around in her seat, looking up in anticipation—though it was hard to tell just how excited she was under the darkness of night.

"That's the third time you've asked, hon. Why don't you just sit back and relax for a bit?" Marcello said, lovingly chiding his wife.

The four of them sat on a sheet of waterproof cloth at the top of the tower, bringing them just a little closer to the night sky. On the low table in front of them was an extravagance of food and ale that sat untouched thus far as the friends were too busy waiting and watching.

After all, it was the Kingdom of Ordine's summer festival today. Years here were split evenly into twelve months of thirty days, while the yearly summer and winter celebrations were each one day long and sat outside of the calendar. Though summer festivals they both were, the ones in Ordine lacked the portable shrines and dancing that were popular in Japan. Instead, the elites of

the royal capital visited the temples to pray for bountiful autumn harvests while the hoi polloi took leave from work to celebrate or visit home. Folks in the capital treated themselves to nicer meals, went shopping, and made the rounds of all the food stalls that cropped up.

Speaking of which, peak season for stalls and other establishments was none other than right now. Dahlia and Irma, too, had gone out shopping and bought two long-sleeved tops in preparation for fall. Retailers aside, people tended to alternate with their coworkers to string together two or three days of vacation before or after the yearly festivals. Even as the chairwoman of her own company and the owner of her own salon, respectively, Dahlia and Irma both took off the days flanking the festival. Soldiers had to alternate days off as well, meaning that the knight Volf and the courier Marcello had worked until this very evening.

On the day of the summer fete, many looked excitedly towards the skies above the castle. Some watched from shops, some brought chairs onto the street, and some sat on rooftops, but everyone was waiting for the same thing—the firework display organized by the castle. Dahlia was no stranger to such things, as they had existed in her past life too. However, what was different here was that the fireworks were the products not of pyrotechnics but of pyromancy.

Compared to the world she had once lived in, this one might have seemed fantastical, but the idea of magic was entirely mundane here. In fact, almost everybody carried at least some magic inside them. There were those who controlled their power as mages but also those like Dahlia who used it to create magical tools.

Like people, certain creatures in this world carried magic, and they were dubbed monsters. There were slimes, horned rabbits, goblins, sea serpents, minotaurs, and dragons, to name a few. Not only that, but monsters also evolved and adapted to their environment or locale. For the people in this world, this was reality and monsters were real threats. When their habitats overlapped with settled country, monsters destroyed farmland, crops, livestock, and even human lives. And once they got large enough in size or number, they brought disaster. Protecting the people against that danger and slaying

monsters were the Order of Beast Hunters, and it was to that very order that Volf belonged.

“Any time now.” As if right on Volf’s cue, a volley of red lights soared into the sky. The Green Tower sat a distance from the castle, so the fireworks appeared modest in scale to their eyes. Despite that, the red covered the sky and overpowered any star.

The mages must have been extraordinarily powerful to launch their fire magic so high up in the sky. Reds of all sorts—deep crimsons, bright reds, vermilions, oranges, terra-cottas—continued to glow before blues and greens—sky, wisteria, dayflower, verdure, and forest—joined the mix. Dahlia couldn’t help but wonder about the technique that went into producing all those different colors. Finally, one sphere each of red, blue, and green raced into the sky, all larger and brighter than the explosions that had come before. Each sphere split into six smaller spheres with twin trails.

Dahlia couldn’t take her eyes off of the gorgeous chrysanthemum-shaped bloom, though she had to fill in the booms in her mind, as these fireworks contained no gunpowder. After a short pause, lines of red light resembling a dragon—likely a fire dragon—streaked across the sky.



“That’s the handiwork of advanced mages from the Mages’ Corps; I saw them practicing in the castle the other day,” Volf whispered.

It was hard to believe that that great dragon had been painted with fire magic. Dahlia reasoned it must have been a lot prettier seen from the castle or from the Central District; here at the tower in the West District, the image appeared a little askew. The dragon in the sky was nevertheless awesome, and cheers roared out around the neighborhood.

When the red dragon dissipated, a moment of silence fell upon the party. The four of them sat upright as they waited intently. After a longer pause, a ball of white light rose into the sky higher and higher still—enough to have made Dahlia wonder if it would ever stop. It lit up their world in a pure white like a fireball from a meteor. As another wave of cheering erupted, Dahlia squinted and shielded her eyes; it became hard to tell the nighttime from the day.

The one capable of creating what seemed to be another sun was none other than the king of Ordine, who commanded the most magical power of any of his royal line. It was most likely a display of fire magic as well, and Dahlia had to wonder what temperature that white-hot fireball must be. The king’s immense power could easily be mistaken for the stuff of tales and legends, and it was a source of awe for his subjects. Conversely, it was a source of dread for the kingdom’s neighbor. Powerful mages numbered more in Ordine than anywhere else as well. It was easy to understand the guarded stance of the neighboring kingdom, although Ordine had never once attacked or invaded a foreign power in its history. As an aside, legends had it that the founder of the kingdom had leveled mountains and monsters to establish the capital city—something that sounded entirely plausible to Dahlia, having seen the man-made miniature sun. Perhaps their power was in their blue blood.

“Every year, I’m reminded of the fact that it really is a sun,” commented Marcello.

“Our king sure is something else!” his wife replied.

Dahlia nodded along as she lit a magical lantern. That ball of white light was bright enough to hurt one’s eyes, and after it was extinguished, the darkness seemed even more profound than before.

She had never met the king, but he was said to have blond hair that shone like the sun and eyes that were dark as night. Other than that, she had no clue as to how he looked. The king's reign had met with overwhelming public approval, and his subjects would hang portraits of their ruler in their homes. His hair and eye color and handsomeness remained constant, but there was much artistic liberty taken otherwise—the work of cunning merchants, Dahlia reckoned.

“A toast! To the Kingdom of Ordine!”

“Cheers!”

It was finally time for the main event: gorging themselves on food and drink. There were dark ales, wheat beers, and crespelle purchased from a food stall—crespelle being slightly thicker crepes, filled with various ingredients and sauces, and wrapped up into a brick. They were readily available at many stalls; Dahlia and Volf had gone out together for crespelle before. There were three flavors today: minced pork and veggies, ham and cheese, and seafood. This year they were filled to bursting and very substantial.

“Let me start reheating these too.” Dahlia began grilling spiedini. On skewers were chicken thigh and breast, obviously, but also heart, gizzard, cartilage, and skin—the last of these being Marcello's favorite. The accompaniments were just as important, and she had prepared two: one a condiment of salt, garlic, and scallions and the other a reduction of fish sauce, rice wine, and honey to be used as a glaze.

All the fats and sauces meant lots of smoke. It'd make for a terrific scent outdoors but a terrible odor indoors. With the compact magical stove, though, she could grill whether she was up on the rooftop or out in the yard without having to worry about any lingering smells. Even if she was the one who invented it, she relished how handy it was in a situation like this.

“Those almost done yet, Dahlia? Maybe I could lend you a hand with somethin’?”

“Marcello, dear, why don't you just sit back and relax?” Then Irma effectively repeated his words. “But *is* there anything we can help with?”

Dahlia giggled at the married couple's exchange. “Don't worry, it won't be

long; sit and chat with each other.”

Volf turned his attention to the grill too. “Is that cartilage there, Dahlia?”

“That’s right. Is it a favorite of yours?” She would have never guessed that a noble like him would have a taste for offal, but perhaps it was something served at his local haunt.

“My favorite’s still gotta be chicken thigh, but I really enjoy the crunch of cartilage. I had it with Marcello the last time we went out together.”

“We hopped from stall to stall before landing at a dive bar,” Marcello added.

“Yeah, I felt like I had every single bottle of liquor under the sun that night.”

“Were they any good?” she asked.

Volf furrowed his brows and stared off into the distance. “Sure, but some were just strange. It was kinda hard to put my finger on exactly what flavor they were...” What could it possibly be? Was it something that was too lowbrow for his noble palate or was it something truly exotic?

For the answer, Dahlia looked to Marcello, who replied, “Boy probably had jungle juice. Never know what you’re gonna get!” That would certainly make for a chance encounter—and one she could stand to avoid.

“There was a sealed bottle too, that dark-gray zinger of a drink—what’s it called again?”

“Boozer’s Bane—that shit ain’t for sippin’; it’s only to get you absolutely trashed,” Marcello answered.

“The first thing Marcello did when he got home was to ask me for medicine, and he’s someone that *never* gets hungover.”

It sounded like quite the peculiar drink, one that Dahlia could stand to avoid as well, but she was glad that the two guys had been able to go on a bit of a bender downtown. Maybe she would’ve had the chance to drink with them like that were she a man; their easygoing smiles brought her a slight pang of envy. Dahlia took a swig of her wheat beer as she flipped the skewers.

The conversation turned back to the topic of fireworks. “Are those all launched by mages? Do you guys have a lot of fire mages at the castle?” asked

Marcello.

“I’d say so, yeah. We’ve got advanced mages who can combine magic as well as knights who wield magic.”

“Still, the most powerful of them all must be the king, right? What grade is his magic, I wonder?” said Irma.

“When I was in school, the highest anyone had was seventeen. The king must be at least twenty, but that’s just my speculation,” Dahlia said.

In high school, people generally aimed to become mages if they had over grade nine magic or advanced mages with thirteen. The minimum to enroll in school for magical toolmaking was four, leading to the idea that the profession was for people who couldn’t make it as mages. However, having more magic did not necessarily make someone a better toolmaker. After having recently gone up one grade, Dahlia found it harder to control her magic than before; affixing kraken tape had become a trickier task. Kraken tape was used for packaging and required very little magic to activate. In fact, using too much magic would cause it to melt and cling to the user’s fingers.

“I bet the king couldn’t handle kraken tape...” Dahlia muttered.

Volf and Marcello laughed along with her, while Irma was recovering from choking on her drink. “What’s that about kraken tape all of a sudden? I pray that you don’t still have slimes living here.”

“Not right now, I don’t.” Dahlia’s straight answer elicited a death glare from Irma, who could *not* deal with slimes. She nearly blacked out when she saw slimes hanging up to dry in and around the tower, even though they were docile creatures with attractive, translucent bodies of jelly that moved quite slowly. “Anyway, having magic isn’t the be-all and end-all of everything. There are people who have magic but don’t use it.”

“Besides, having *that* much magic would put me at a loss for what to do with it.”

“Making magic crystals? Or perhaps emergency lighting during a disaster?”

“Just make sure you don’t disrespect the king like that in front of others.”

While they shot the breeze, the spiedini became ready. They all grabbed the skewers they wanted and began digging in as they watched the nightscape. Dahlia's first pick was thigh with the sweet sauce—the sugars gave the meat a great char. It wasn't the most polite way to eat it, but she bit into the top piece and tore it off of her skewer. The chicken was juicy and smoky and absolutely delicious. As she silently tooted her own horn on a job well done, she watched Volf, with his eyes shut tight, savor a bite topped with the salt and alliums. The cartilage and gizzard skewers were done as well, and she gently placed them on his plate so as not to take him out of the moment.

"Nothing beats Dahlia's spiedini with the salt spread paired with a dark ale!" Marcello voiced his pleasure as he devoured a skewer of grilled chicken skin and a mug of beer, and his praises tickled Dahlia.

"What are you talking about, Marcello? It's obvious that her skewers are best with the sweet sauce! Have it with the wheat beer and you've got the quintessence of summer right in your hands!" Irma fired back.

"That's brilliant too, but I like mine!"

The Nuvolaris continued to discuss the pros and cons of each combination of meat and condiment and drink with all seriousness. Dahlia didn't see the point in arguing as they could simply just try out the different combinations themselves, but she let them be as she realized that the couple had fun bickering. She grabbed a bottle each of the white and the dark and quietly topped up their glasses.

Volf began grilling another round of the skewers. "Here, Dahlia, let me handle the stove. The chef's gotta eat too."

Dahlia sat beside him, appreciative of his offer. "How about you, Volf? What's your combo of choice?" She figured that she would make a mental note and get more of his favorite for the next time they did this.

He thought long and hard before breaking into a big smile. "Skewers and beer!"

She empathized with and chuckled at his open-ended answer. He had a point—it was all good.

“Ack, it’s burning!”

The heat might have been turned too high or he might have put too much of the glaze on, and so the skewers were getting a little color on them. But it was nothing to worry about and she assured him, “You’re fine. The char is what makes it yummy.”

The panic on his face subsided and turned into a smile. “Sorry,” he said as he placed two skewers on her plate. The chicken with the wheat beer was, for whatever reason, more delicious than when she grilled her own. In the end, the four friends managed to hide a surprising amount of the drink and food in their stomachs.

“Darling, I can’t!”

“Aw, boy...”

As the couple were about to go home, Irma, having eaten or drunk too much, found herself unable to descend the stairs to the ground floor. Marcello moaned as though he were frustrated with her, but in reality, he had a grin on his face as he swept her into his arms and carried her down. Dahlia offered to fetch a carriage for them, but the couple refused, saying that they didn’t have too much to lug to the station.

After seeing them off, Dahlia and Volf returned to the rooftop of the tower. He handily rolled up the waterproof cloth, showing his familiarity with the action. After he carried the table back down, the brief cleanup process was complete.

As Dahlia was wrapping up all the leftover crespelle into one paper package, she tried desperately to recall how she had spent last year’s summer festival. The only thing she could remember was the color of the bouquet she’d brought to her father’s grave, as it hadn’t been long since he passed. Try as she might, though, she couldn’t recall the festivities, fireworks, food, or anything else.

Volf’s sudden voice startled her. “Would be nice to drink together like this again next year.”

“Shall I put you down for a reservation, then?”

“If I may.” Volf bowed very politely, and Dahlia returned the gesture.

She looked back up at him and they both lost their composure, giggling at the random bout of formality. “Want to continue the festivities with another drink?”

“How can I say no?”

Under the starry skies, Dahlia wondered if she could really keep that promise. This time next year, Volf could be called away on an expedition or have some other urgent matter pop up. Not to mention his family would be promoted to marquis by then, and that might complicate things too.

In spite of all of her worries, she knew one thing to be true: there would be no forgetting the treasured memories of this year’s celebrations.

The Magical Toolmaking Teacher

One sunny afternoon, Dahlia, along with her employee Ivano, visited the home of Oswald Zola, baron, chairman, and now her mentor in magical toolmaking. In the nobles' quarter near the Central District was his estate, a large plot of land with a predominantly white mansion and a beautiful lush lawn enclosed by a gray half wall. Once the guests were welcomed in, it became obvious that the interior had been built and furnished with only the finest materials. If anything, it unsettled Dahlia every time she trod on the floor with her outdoor shoes. Oswald had his toolmaking facility in a separate building connected to his home. Before leading to the studio, the hallway connected the main residence to a break room, which featured a large, ornate table, several chairs, and a big sofa that seemed perfect for a power nap.

"Thank you very much for giving me your time today, Mr. Oswald." After Dahlia and Ivano offered their greetings, the silver-haired middle-aged man and the raven-haired young woman—today's teacher Oswald and his third wife Ermelinda, respectively—smiled and greeted the Rossetti party in return.

Whenever Dahlia took private lessons from Oswald, there would be people waiting on them nearby; Dahlia was a young single woman, after all. Today, Ivano and Ermelinda would be waiting in the break room for the two toolmakers. Ivano had brought some work along with him, but Dahlia couldn't help but feel guilty for dragging him along. It would be preferable to hire a new employee and have them chaperone her, she thought.

"No time like the present; let us get to the lesson straightaway. Today, I shall have you experiment with sea serpent lung," Oswald explained. That caught her attention. It was quite the rare material and one that she had never dealt with before, making it a very exciting proposition. "Mr. Mercadante, I shall be activating my anti-eavesdropping device. If you suspect that something unexpected is happening, feel free to open the door at any time."

"Much obliged," Ivano responded. "Chairwoman, please be careful with your

experiments.” She nodded.

It was only a short while ago that Dahlia had injured herself in her attempt to craft the sköll bracelet. After that, Oswald had warned her that enchanting with sköll was a potentially lethal process. Volf and Ivano had been shaken to the core to hear it and had worried immensely for her. Though Dahlia had promised to be more careful in the future, it seemed it hadn’t been enough to fully persuade Ivano—yet another thing she felt sorry for.

She reminded herself to experiment with caution before getting up from her seat to follow Oswald into the room next door. His workshop was incredibly spacious as well, with likely ten times as much floor space as hers in the tower. The ground was tiled in light gray slabs of marble while the walls were an impeccable glossy white. The refined furnishings and fixtures were all black accented with silver. Covering two of the walls were black shelves that reached from floor to ceiling, which were filled with all sorts of books, magically sealed boxes, and cases made from glass and various metals. The containers likely housed tools and materials, as Dahlia could feel waves of magical energy hit her just by being close to them. Another wall had large windows showing the turf and planters with scarlet sage in full bloom. The flowers jostled in the light breeze, reminding Dahlia of her first visit here.



The first time Dahlia had entered Oswald’s studio was some time before her big presentation at the castle. She had been terrified stepping foot into such a fancy workshop. Though her father Carlo had mentored her in magical toolmaking, there was much about the dangers and the handling of rare materials that he had not had the chance to teach her. Concerned, Oswald had agreed to undertake those responsibilities. A master toolmaker would never pass on their advanced techniques and expertise to anyone other than their own disciples or family members, making Oswald and Dahlia’s agreement rather extraordinary.

As she sat nervously in her seat, she noticed the budding scarlet sage through the glass windows.

“I planted those for my son, but they don’t seem to get picked much any more,” commented Oswald.

“Did he pick them to suck out the nectar?”

“Yes, my elder son used to love it, hence why I planted so much of it—so much, in fact, I got chewed out by Caterina when she learned.”

The same flowers had grown in the tower’s yard when Dahlia was young, and she reminisced about their flavor. She thought of how sweet it was that Oswald and his son would taste the nectar together. “Did you do the same when you were a child, Mr. Oswald?”

“Actually, I didn’t learn to do so until Carlo showed me how. I remember the occasion—we were still in school and went harvesting materials. He recommended going for scarlet sage, honeysuckle, and milk vetch.”

“So it was my father...” She had been wondering how a nobleman like Oswald had learned something so uncouth, and to think he would pass it onto his son as well. She stared out the window at the long row of sage flowers.

“Did your father show you how to do it as well?”

She snapped back to attention. “Oh. Yes, he did.”

“The milk vetch is my personal favorite. I have jars of its honey, but I must say, it is hardly as charming as tasting the nectar fresh like I used to do as a young man.”

Dahlia couldn’t help but let out a giggle at how he casually dropped that comment. And just like that, her nervousness had vanished elsewhere before she knew it.

“Now then, shall we begin?” he asked as they took their seats at the table, facing each other. “May I inquire as to how you addressed Carlo in the workshop?”

“I called him ‘father’ as I usually did, though his other apprentice called him ‘master.’” The moment she mentioned the other apprentice, it prickled her as memories of the past ran through her mind, like bare skin brushing against briar. Dahlia shook the thoughts away. “Um, would it be okay to address you with ‘professor’ while we are here?” She was in no way Oswald’s apprentice, but it seemed too impolite to call him by his first name while she was under his instruction.

“‘Professor,’ you say? Why, that’s quite novel to me.” His silver eyes narrowed as the corners of his mouth curved gracefully upward.

“Please feel free to treat me with as much respect as you would have for the worst kind of student.”

“Allow me to think of you as a model student, then. However, I should put it out there that my teaching style seems to be problematic—I have lost more than a couple of apprentices in my time—so I implore you to speak up if I rub you the wrong way,” he said. That did not come as a surprise to Dahlia, given the overwhelming number of flash cards he had prepared for her last time. She could see that Oswald had likely expected too much of his apprentices. “First and foremost, you will need this.”

“Thank you very much.” Dahlia opened the silvery sealed box to find a thick book bound in red leather studded with a beautiful red gemstone and finely inscribed with a spell circle on the front cover. In the center was studded a beautiful red gemstone. “Oh, this is a spellbook!”

“As of right now, it is but a blank book. Bind it to your own blood so that it can be opened by you and only you. If anyone else tries to force it open, the fire magic affixed to it will ensure it is reduced to ashes.”

“Whoa...” The wondrous inner workings made her heart skip a beat. She had heard about books enchanted with fire magic, but this was the first time she’d had the chance to see one with her own eyes. Dahlia could not keep her hands or eyes off it, and she proceeded to flip through the pages and examine the back cover as well.

“You seem to be brimming with curiosity. Perhaps you do not have one of your own?”

“That’s correct. It is my first time seeing one in person.” Dahlia borrowed a silver needle to prick the tip of her left pinky—it stung, although it could hardly be called painful. After a droplet of her blood made its way onto the red jewel, she applied her magic to spread it evenly and waited for it to permeate. Before long, the spell circle flashed red a single time and then slowly faded from the cover.

“It looks like it has finished bonding to you. Very good. Now, write down some

things you would like to learn,” instructed Oswald. “Oh, and might I ask how you keep your written ideas and designs currently?”

“I jot them down on loose paper or in my notebook, then store them in my leather briefcase.”

“Is your briefcase some sort of magical tool? How about for long-term storage?”

“No, it is a simple, ordinary case. After I am done with my notes, I file them away in a bookshelf in my workshop,” she explained. Oswald cocked an eyebrow; Dahlia must’ve said something wrong, but she couldn’t see what it was.

“Your security seems somewhat lax. I recommend using a strongbox exclusively for your sensitive documents. And if I may ask, how did Carlo do it?”

“Erm...” She hesitated for a moment. “He would bundle them up and place them on his workbench. Once he accumulated some more, he would then stow them in a crate by his feet.” Carlo hadn’t been a particularly tidy person; not only would he use crafting materials as paperweights, he would clutter up the desktop as well. Once it got too messy, Dahlia would simply throw his papers in the crate—though she couldn’t possibly bear to tell Oswald that.

“I see that both you and Carlo keep only the most trusted people around you...” He sounded more flabbergasted than shocked at the revelation. Dahlia realized that she was nowhere near as prudent about confidentiality in this life. There had only been three people who frequented their workspace—Carlo, Tobias, and herself—and the visitors who had come by were longtime business partners of her father’s. The ongoing peace that she enjoyed meant that she had never felt the need to protect herself. “The larger your company becomes, the more you ought to scrutinize the intentions of your callers and be mindful of the risk of intruders. I recommend that you shore up your security for your own well-being and for the safety of your products.”

“Thank you very much for your advice. I will be sure to look into it.” Her first lesson had become one not in magical toolmaking but one in security.

Oswald’s silvery gaze shifted to her left hand. “Is that ring of yours a magical tool?”

“Yes, it has an antidotal enchantment.” The golden band around her finger was the one Volf had given her to prevent poisoning. Dahlia had been eating out more often, and so she usually had the ring on these days.

“Hm. That isn’t quite sufficient.” He went to one of the shelves along the walls, then brought over a small silver sealed box. Inside was a thinnish gold bangle with a very expensive-looking glint. It was obvious even at a glance that it was a fine piece of work. “Here, for your protection. It has been worn previously, but that should make it no less effective. It completely nullifies poisoning, confusion, petrification, soporifics, anesthetics, and even aphrodisiacs. As a chairwoman, you ought to have this level of protection.”

“Do I really need *that* much, though?”

“Oh, very much so. Dining with the nobility always poses some risk. You could slowly introduce poisons to your system to build up a tolerance or have a countermeasure like this. Know that some nobles will go to extreme lengths to benefit their own clans and others take delight in deception. A spring lamb becomes a feast for the wolves that prey.”

Sixteen was the age of majority in this world, and by that count, Dahlia had already been an adult for a few years. Despite that, she had just been referred to as a spring lamb. The truth about the nobility was terrifying. She wasn’t proud of her naivete, but at least she had experience with personal protection and security in her previous life that she would now apply to the present one.

“Remember,” Oswald continued, “other forms of danger may lurk, so be sure to be on your guard when dealing with nobles.”

“I will. Thank you for so generously lending me the bangle.” As Dahlia took hold of it, she felt powerful waves of magical energy emanating from within, prompting her to inspect it. On the outside, it was a simple gold bangle. However, inlaid on the inner surface were what appeared to be small white, black, red, and green stones. “What materials were used to make this?”

“The bangle itself is made of hardened gold. On the inside, the white piece is unicorn horn, black is bicorn horn, red is fire dragon scale, and green is forest snake heart.”

“That’s amazing!” It was chock-full of rare materials. She could see the

exceptionally fine magical circuit coursing throughout the bangle. But the more she looked at it, the more she worried. “Um, if you don’t mind me asking, could you please tell me how much this costs?”

“Back then, the materials ran for fifteen gold pieces or thereabouts, I believe. I shall lend this to you until you can craft one of your own.”

He spoke as though it were a matter of no consequence, but even the base price was enough to make her worry, especially given that she was only borrowing the bangle. However, judging by the technique, the value with labor included must have been at least three times as much. The thought of damaging the piece made it daunting to put on. “This is far too valuable—”

“As I said, this is a used item, so worry not about the money. Forgive me for not warning you earlier, but you will need this as a magical toolmaker, as you will be handling some of the more unusual monster parts. Simply interacting with certain materials can cause confusion or cause you to faint, and that would trouble me as well.” Oswald made a very good point; she would inconvenience him if she were to succumb to any ailments.

“How long will it take before I am able to craft a piece like this?”

“At this rate, I would say at least one year. I look forward to seeing your endeavors.”

“I’ll work hard in order to return it as soon as I can.” His bright smile did little to ease the pressure on her, and perhaps his previous apprentices couldn’t bear it either. There was one more thing weighing on her mind. “Um, if I have the bangle, does that mean I won’t need the ring anymore?”

“It replaces the ring, yes. But if it bothers you that the bangle has previously been worn by someone else, I can always make you a new one.”

“Oh, no! It’s nothing like that!” Dahlia now knew better than to inquire any further; it might have been something left behind by one of Oswald’s apprentices. She quietly cast her gaze to the ground.

But contrary to her expectations, Oswald wore a smile, as though he understood her feelings. “I appreciate your tact, but it is nothing that needs tiptoeing around. The bangle was a gift for a lady who I used to see. When we

separated, she returned it to me.”

It was *totally* something that needed tiptoeing around. Dahlia felt that he didn’t owe her such a thorough explanation either, and now she didn’t know how to react. The rumors of Oswald’s wide experience with romance seemed to be true. At the very least, he had three wives, so he was accomplished in that aspect. Dahlia racked her brains for what to say, but she didn’t need to—he continued nonchalantly.

“Sentimental value aside, the bangle is only a tool,” Oswald said. “I should like to get into the topic of rare materials, but is there anything in particular you would like to learn about?”

If he was offering, she was buying. “I’d like to learn more about sköll, if that’s okay.” Dahlia replied with the monster she’d like to learn about the most—the one with which she’d enchanted Volf’s bracelet. The sköll was a lupine monster with a pitch-black torso and gold or silver eyes. It flew through the air, feeding on avians, obviously, but also cockatrices, unicorns, pegasi, and other airborne monsters. Needless to say, Dahlia had never encountered one in the flesh, save for its fangs.

“At first glance, the sköll may look like a wolf, but it is actually a flying monster. It possesses powerful air magic and sonic attacks, making it a particularly difficult foe.”

“Sonic attacks?”

“It may not be written in any bestiaries, but the howl of a sköll causes intimidation and confusion, said an adventurer who had battled one.”

It was shocking that it was an adventurer who had fought against a sköll, not a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters. Were they a dragoon? Or did they ride another creature into battle? Did they fly around with air magic? Or did they perhaps shoot the sköll down with spells? Dahlia was full of questions.

“The fang of a sköll grants resistance to air magic and sonic attacks, while its hide provides physical defense, and the heart can be used to impart magic resistance. Its claws can be used to strengthen weapons. All parts of the sköll are difficult to obtain and, if available, are very costly as well.” From a magically sealed box, Oswald produced a sköll fang that sparkled a brilliant silver. Frankly,

it looked less like a fang and more like the centerpiece of an article of expensive jewelry. He continued, “The only sköll parts I have in stock are fangs. Enchanting with a piece this large would require at least grade nine magic but preferably ten.”

Dahlia felt trickles of sweat drip down her temple. The piece Oswald was showing her was slightly smaller than the one she had used to craft Volf’s bracelet, which really drove home just how much danger she had been in. She was beyond grateful to have come out of that experiment relatively unscathed.

“Once the enchantment is underway, the sköll fang will not release its grip on one’s magic, which often causes the craftsman to feel unwell. Be sure to have someone in the same room when working with sköll fangs. Working with parts from the males of the species will drain more magic. Furthermore, if the individual sköll has any peculiarities or mutations, it will require vastly more magic, so be sure of the animals from which any parts were sourced. If you are unsure, have an adept advanced mage appraise or analyze the parts. It may cost money, but it is better to be a little poorer than dead.”

“How adept should the mage be?” she asked.

“Fifteen is a good bet, but even better is a mage who’s off the charts. That would mean those from marquis or duke families, or perhaps even from the royal family,” suggested Oswald. The tip of Dahlia’s pen froze in the midst of taking notes in the spellbook. How in the heavens would she ask *anyone* in those positions? He continued, “If you require someone to appraise or analyze parts for you, try asking Sir Volfred for an introduction to his elder brother.”

“His brother?”

“Yes, Lord Guido Scalfarotto. He is a company leader within the Mages’ Corps. There are many advanced mages in his team, so it may be a good idea to ask him for advice.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Dahlia replied, but she couldn’t imagine anything she could ask his help for—she was only a friend of his brother’s, and a commoner at that.

“I am sure Sir Volfred would already know this, but enchantments with sköll give powerful air magic, even when the user does not possess much magic of

their own. A bit of a bronco, so they say.”

Dahlia chuckled. *What, so is it a wolf or is it a horse?* But after her time (and injuries) with the sköll bracelet, she understood full well how hard it was to control.

“With sköll-enchanted items, I recommend blood bonding them to someone who can fully control their power, a knight who has very little magic, or someone who cannot express magic externally. Make sure you know for whom you are crafting the item and whether you really want to market it.”

“Right. I have no plans of selling anything like that.”

“A wise decision. It is impossible to know for certain how someone would use a tool like that. As much as it is possible for a knight to use it for mobility on the battlefield and to defend a nation from monsters, it is just as possible for the likes of an assassin to use it to tear a nation apart.” Oswald’s soft tone sent a chill down Dahlia’s spine. As if he had already anticipated her reaction, he set his eyes of silver on her. “Think. Think of who you would and who you would not want to use the tools you create with your very hands.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be very careful.” Her ears ached from his words. There were far too many faults she found within herself upon reflection.

“Miss Dahlia, may I ask, how much magic did you initially have and what grade you are at now?”

“I started at grade eight, but I think I have a bit more now,” she responded to Oswald. Her magic was increasing in parallel with her skill at magical toolmaking.

“In that case, let us first raise your magic to grade ten or thereabouts. It should help with the hands-on aspect of toolmaking too.”

“Erm, you make it sound so simple.” Dahlia had thought that it would come naturally as she crafted and enchanted things. Neither her father nor her teachers in school had taught her that there were methods of enhancing one’s magic artificially.

“It isn’t exactly a secret that there are ways to induce greater magical

capacity. Rather, the techniques are not taught to students and minors because they may cause harm to bodies that are still developing. Having more magic than one's body can handle causes hypermageia, you see."

The symptoms of hypermageia differed from person to person, but there had been cases of shortness of breath and even cardiac arrest. On rare occasions, it occurred in the children of noble families, but Dahlia hadn't known until now that it was caused by attempts to enhance one's magic.

Oswald proceeded to explain. "But the process is rather straightforward, actually. Once one has finished growing, one can simply exhaust all one's magic, replenish it with mana potions, then use more magic. Doing so tricks the body into believing that there is more in the magic reserves, and thus, capacity builds up over time. Ten to fifteen of these cycles should result in an increase of one grade."

It certainly sounded straightforward, but a single mana potion sold for two gold. Multiply that by ten to fifteen and it would be the equivalent of two to three hundred thousand yen from Dahlia's perspective. Sure, it was feasible, but not without incurring a substantial cost along the way.

"Nobles and wealthier merchant families use this technique to raise their children's grade by one or two after puberty."

"Wow, I never knew..."

"Generally, people can reach three grades above their base magic level this way, which is about as far as they would progress by using magic every day. Those who are adept at using magic might be able to attain four grades. In your case, eleven is a safe increase as it is three above eight, but twelve might be possible if you push your limits."

"Eleven, huh? I guess I won't be able to surpass my father unless I force it."

"What? At what grade was Carlo before his passing?" Oswald had a puzzled look upon his face. He must've been very shaken, as Dahlia had never seen him behave this way before.

"He was grade twelve."

"If I recall correctly, Carlo was grade seven in his school days."

“Huh?”

“The body can be thought of as a vessel for magic. Using more magic than the body has in reserve results in damage more often than not. The same is true of using magical tools. But artificially increasing one’s magic by five grades would put one in peril. It would have been extremely reckless for Carlo to attempt to achieve grade twelve.”

This was news to Dahlia. Had her father been so reckless without her knowledge? She had never seen him consume mana potions in their home, but perhaps he’d been young and dumb before he grew out of it. Maybe he had secretly raised his magic levels while she was still in school.

She did remember that when Carlo had received some sköll fangs to prevent overheating in his large hot water dispensers, he’d mentioned that they required grade twelve magic. Had he pushed his limits because of the rare materials and the large magical tools? Had he seen it as a challenge for his skills as a toolmaker? Had he really gone so far out of curiosity? Whatever the case may have been, it wasn’t as though Dahlia had a chance to ask him anymore.

“My father...” She hesitated for a moment. “I think he wanted to try using sköll to craft a large magical tool.”

“He was simply curious? Well, that does sound awfully like Carlo. But challenging himself was no reason to leave you behind all alone in the world...”

“I’ll say.” Dahlia felt sorry for herself, and so did Oswald. The text in her spellbook blurred, so she blinked away her tears. “So you’re saying that I could raise my magic level to eleven all by myself through draining my magic and drinking mana potions?” It was a very appealing prospect—the more magic she had, the more enchantments she could do.

“Draining your magic may cause you to faint; this is not something to be done alone. Do you intend to make me regret teaching you?”

His stern voice struck guilt into her. “No, professor. Sorry, sir.”

Oswald shook his head and softly sighed. “No, I apologize as well. It was thoughtless of me to bring up Carlo again. That must have come as a complete shock to you.”

“No, er, well... Father was always a bit of a free spirit. He was someone who just did whatever he wanted to.” Thinking back, Dahlia realized just how much of a free spirit her father had been. She respected him both as a magical toolmaker and as a father, but there were aspects of his personality that had made him quite the handful. Dahlia remembered chastising Carlo every time he stumbled home after drinking too much; that was a habit he’d never overcome.

Dahlia’s attention turned back to magic. Crafting tools from rare materials often required higher-level magic. Her father had managed to raise his magic to twelve; a nobleman like Oswald was surely above that. “Would I be able to craft tools like you with just grade eleven magic?”

“My magic is at ten and change, but even so, I am able to craft just about everything sold in my store.”

“Really?” His answer took her by surprise and she couldn’t come up with much more to say.

“Though I was born into a viscount family, I ranked the lowest in my line in terms of magic. I was only at grade four before I brought myself up to this level, so you could see how my weak magical and physical strength barred me from becoming a mage or a knight. Instead, I chose to be a magical toolmaker. But don’t let the number fool you; you would be surprised at how much you can do with my level of magic.”

“But Mr. Oswald, aren’t you glad? You’ve become a super-duper magical toolmaker now!”

Oswald froze up; he parroted back her words as if he were utterly astounded. “Super-duper?”

“I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to speak like such a child.”

“Oh, no, it’s merely that I didn’t expect your phrasing to bring back memories of Carlo.” After reverting to his usual smile, he went to the shelves again to bring back yet another sealed box. “Now, shall we talk about the fairy glass used in Sir Volfred’s eyeglasses?”

“Yes, please.”

“Fairy glass is said to be the crystallization of fairies’ magical power to conceal

themselves. It is used to create trick lanterns, but the most common application is for camouflage or otherwise deceiving the eyes of others.”

Dahlia recalled her conversation with Volf in which he’d said the Intelligence Office made use of it as well, which had caused her a great deal of concern.

Oswald continued his lecture. “Lately, the material has seen increased demand from both domestic and foreign militaries; thus, purchases are subject to greater scrutiny. Large orders of fairy glass are assumed to be for trade with the castle or high-ranking nobles, or for developing armaments. I recommend discretion when procuring it.”

“*Oh.*” Too late for that; she’d already put in a large order with Orlando & Co. But knowing what she did now, it made sense that their chairman Ireneo had commented on “the path she has chosen”—he probably suspected Dahlia of aspiring to join the military-industrial complex. Ireneo very likely had the wrong idea about her frequent business dealings with people in the castle. “Actually, may I have your advice about that? The truth is that I ordered four pieces of fairy glass from Orlando & Co. to make Sir Volf’s glasses.”

“Four pieces, you say? It would be hard to pass it off as being for research purposes...” Oswald closed his eyes and stroked his chin. “Let the Zola Company procure the order. We shall say that it is for the production of fairy glass lanterns. Furthermore, from now on, have Mr. Mercadante deal with Orlando & Co.”

“Thank you very much. I’m sorry to have brought you so much trouble.”

“Not to worry; it is but a trifling matter. Please seek out help from Viscount Jedda, Sir Volfred, or even me if you need help with rare materials such as fairy glass or sköll parts. It might not be the safest for you to ask other companies.”

“I will. Thank you.” Dahlia had ended up having to turn to Oswald for help on a variety of matters. She was sure that never ever had a student brought more trouble in their first lesson, and she thought she should slip in a bit more with her tuition fee.

“Let us get back on track. Enchanting with fairy glass can be done at grade seven, but grade eight is preferable. It is a nuanced material in that each enchantment will expend about half of the user’s magic. Never enchant twice in

a row without consuming a mana potion, lest you faint.”

A cold sweat ran down her back as she took notes in her spellbook. Whether it was courage or foolhardiness that she lacked, she couldn't bring herself to tell Oswald that she had done exactly what he'd just told her not to when she was crafting Volf's glasses.

He continued, “Fairy glass tends to cause the user to hallucinate. If you succumb to the hallucinations and lose concentration, it will shatter into dust. Though powdered fairy glass is still usable, whole pieces are much more effective. You should try enchanting with each and take note of the pronounced differences.”

“Will do.” As Dahlia scribbled with her pen, she thought of her father again. When he'd failed to enchant the windows in her room, what images had he seen?

“May I inquire as to what you saw when you crafted the spectacles, Dahlia?”

“Um, I saw a fairy in its last moments. I remember conversing with it too.”

“Is that right?”

“Afterwards, I felt my father's presence beside me as I completed the enchantment. If I could have had it my way, the illusion would have shown me a clear image of his face instead...” She shook her head as if to disperse the thoughts from her mind, lest tears well up in her eyes again.

“Now, if there is anything that I went over that you did not understand or if I said anything to offend you, please let me know.”

Dahlia replied, “Your lesson has been very enjoyable and easy to absorb.”

“Good to hear. I often tell others ‘think for yourself,’ but I understand the phrase does not sit well with many. Ah, if only I were half as affable as Carlo...”

She found that odd. Oswald had so kindly tutored her thus far; in no way was he unsociable. “I think everyone ought to think for themselves. My father, with his commoner's tongue, would often ask me ‘how 'bout it?’ or ‘whaddya think?’”

Oswald paused for a moment. “Thank you, Dahlia. I have learned much from you as well.”

“You have?”

“I have always taught others the way I was taught, but you have taught me I need to adjust my speech and tone to my audience. Goodness. It is shameful how many years it took for me to realize this...” Oswald left no room for Dahlia to add much at all. Then, he turned his silvery gaze on her. “Forgive me for saying so, but I believe you made the right choice in ending your engagement with Tobias.”

“Erm, what brought that to mind?”

“I avoided saying so explicitly earlier, but the images that fairy glass shows are typically the departure and death of loved ones. Often, it would be one’s significant others, family, or friends.”

“Then what does it mean that I saw a fairy?” Dahlia had seen a translucent fairy but—as far as she knew with two lives of experience combined—she had never met one before that day.

“I believe that was the fairy’s memory embedded in the glass. It is said that if the enchanter concentrates hard enough, they will become attuned to the fairy. Unfortunately for me, I have never been able to do so. My master, though, said that he saw many when he was young.”

It made sense to her that the memories might be the fairy’s. When she’d enchanted those glasses, she had watched the fairy pass away. It hadn’t been an illusion or a hallucination, but rather the creature’s last memories. It had been chased, scared, had lost hope, and used its concealment magic, but it hadn’t been able to outrun death. Its lingering emotions had weighed it down, preventing it from crossing to the other side of the rainbow without Dahlia’s help. Perhaps, then, the fairy—much like herself—had been sent to another world. She had no way to find out for sure; all that she could do was pray for its soul.

Dahlia asked, “Um, have you seen the illusions, then?”

“Yes, I have. Every time, I see my wives walking away with their backs turned

to me.”

“That...must be tough.”

“Though I know they are merely illusions, the knowledge does not make them easier pills to swallow. They tend to cause nightmares as well, so I recommend spending the night with company after enchanting with fairy glass.”

“That may be difficult, as I live alone.” Both Irma and Lucia would agree to keep her company if she asked, though Dahlia would feel sorry if she forced Marcello to spend the night alone. If it were Lucia, Dahlia would feel sorry for herself—Lucia would have her try on a mountain of clothes on the pretext of preventing nightmares.

“Dahlia, how about keeping a guard dog? Perhaps borrow one just for the night that you need it. A large black-haired one would be fine, I say.”

“A large black one, like a nightdog? I can’t imagine how much energy they would have.” Nightdogs weren’t dissimilar to the German Shepherds of her previous life. They were famed for their prowess as guards as well as for their agility, night vision, and intimidation factor. However, big dogs meant big walks and big meals, which didn’t exactly make it easy to keep them around.

“They are kept in the palace as guard dogs too, so how about asking Sir Volfred about it?”

“Sure, I’ll see what he thinks.”

With a very satisfied grin on his face, Oswald nodded enthusiastically.



“Ugh. This is way too hard coming right out of boosting my magic...” Dahlia grumbled to herself as she gingerly set down onto the workbench the hand mirror that she had just finished enchanting with sea serpent lung. Oswald had been lecturing her on the material before an urgent message called him away to the manor.

The mirror gleamed under the sun, but the surface had conspicuous imperfections in the form of air bubbles. Powdered sea serpent lung was sprinkled on top of the cut and polished crystal, then liquefied with a stream of magic and applied in an even coating. Ideally, the powder should have formed a

uniform and perfectly reflective layer. The enchantment should also have made the sea serpent mirror extremely buoyant despite its compact size.

The sea was a cruel mistress, and so to remedy her dangers, the sea serpent mirror was created. It was a survival tool that functioned as both a flotation device and an emergency signal. However, a significant limitation was that sea serpent lung was hard to come by, meaning that the item was reserved for the powerful and wealthy. Everyone else made do with life buoys of kraken leather.

Enchanting the mirror meant holding the same position for too long, and Dahlia's shoulders had become just a bit stiff. While she stood up and stretched, her gaze drifted towards the garden. The scarlet sage, which had previously been budding, was now in full bloom and swaying in the breeze. In the midst of it stood an artless young boy, hair and eyes silver and just as pure—anybody would recognize him as Oswald's son. From what Dahlia could recall, he had recently entered high school, making him around thirteen or fourteen years of age. He picked a flower and placed it against his innocent smile to extract the nectar from within. Then a second time—at least until he became aware of her gaze.

"Ah..." After both of them were frozen in place for a few seconds, the boy looked as though he was ready to burst into tears.

Dahlia leaped forward to swing the windows open. "Um, hi there!"

"Y-Yes?" The boy answered her call timidly.

In all this panic, she realized she hadn't anything to follow up her greeting with. As thoughts churned in her head, she looked by his feet. "May I have some too? Of the sage, I mean."

The boy bent over and snapped a flower off the stem, then walked to the window. His face bright red, he stretched his arm out as far as he could to deliver her order. "Here you are..."

"Thank you very much." Just as the boy had done, she peeled open the petals to suck out the nectar; the sweet flavor evoked comforting childhood memories. "How yummy. These are much sweeter than the ones I had growing at home."

“Oh, um, I think my father searched for the perfect cultivar.” The boy’s smile was tinged with what seemed to be embarrassment, replacing his nervousness. “Thank you very much for being so considerate after catching me in such a disgraceful act. Please accept my apologies as well. And, um, I would be very grateful if we could keep this a secret...”

“Only if you don’t tell anyone about what I did either.” Dahlia raised her sage flower at him and the partners in crime shared a giggle.

She invited him in, and the boy ran towards the door that separated the garden from the building. He swung the door open and headed into the workshop, blazing past Ivano and Ermelinda, who looked on with curiosity. “Forgive me for failing to introduce myself earlier. I am Oswald Zola’s eldest son, Raulaere. Please call me Raul for short.”

“My name is Dahlia Rossetti and I’m from the Rossetti Trading Company. Please call me by my given name as well.”

It was a pleasant exchange, though his eyes shot open wide after she gave her name. “I hope it is not too brash of me to ask, but would you happen to be from the Rossetti family that invented the magical lantern?”

“Yes, it was my grandfather who created that.”

“And the dryer and the waterproof cloth were by the Rossettis as well?”

“That’s correct.”

“Wow, it is an incredible honor to meet you! Your products are all so marvelous!”

His joy and ardor made her ever so slightly embarrassed as she thanked him for his kind words. They sat facing each other diagonally across the workbench, on top of which sat the two mirrors, which Raul was studying closely. “What kind of magical tools are these?”

“Those are hand mirrors enchanted with sea serpent. The one on this side is the example made by Professor Oswald,” she said, pointing, “and this one is mine. As you can see, there is a world of difference between the two.” Dahlia sighed as she stared into hers, the four air pockets beneath the surface warping the reflection. Oswald’s was as perfect as could be, with no bubbles or haziness

on its even more reflective surface.

“What, um, do you think of my father as a magical toolmaker, Ms. Dahlia?”

“He is one of the greatest toolmakers I know—if not *the* greatest.”

“That’s very kind of you to say, even if it is flattery. However, my father’s magic level isn’t that high and, well, it is my mother who is from a viscount family...”

“I don’t think that makes any difference. Your father’s knowledge and skills are top-notch, and with his inventions of the cooling and chilling fans, he even has regular business dealings with the castle. The proof is in the pudding, wouldn’t you say?” Oswald was her teacher and a man she respected, so she couldn’t hold back from sharing her honest thoughts. However, that was a lapse in judgment, as the boy in front of her was Oswald’s son. Her fretting was cut short when she looked up at Raul—his silvery eyes, looking exactly like his father’s, were open wide again.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked a guest such an odd question. Do you work with my father, Ms. Dahlia?”

“I’m currently studying under him.”

“You’re learning magical toolmaking from my father? Does that mean you’ll marry him in the future?”

“Absolutely not!” Though she didn’t mean to, Dahlia fired back with such ferocity that the boy hung his head. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t want there to be any misunderstanding...”

“No, I should be the one to apologize. I shouldn’t have assumed anything just because you are studying under my father...” The craft, after all, was usually passed on only to apprentices and family. In a profession where everyone was in competition, it was unheard of for a master toolmaker to mentor an outsider like Dahlia.

“See, my father passed away very abruptly, and so there are a lot of knowledge and techniques I’ve yet to learn. That’s why your father Mr. Oswald has so graciously taken me on as a student.”

“I see. I’m sorry to have jumped to conclusions.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I should have explained the situation.”

As their duel of apologies ended, the man of the hour returned. Shocked by his son’s presence in the workshop, he stood beside the workbench and squinted in suspicion. “As you can see, Raulaere, we have a guest at the moment; do you have an urgent matter for me?”

“No, I don’t. I apologize, father. Please excuse me.”

Dahlia couldn’t bear their icy brusqueness. She frantically interjected, “Um, I was the one who called out to him!”

“You did, Miss Dahlia? Was something the matter?” Oswald asked.

“Erm, he graciously gave me some scarlet sage.”

“Raulaere, wouldn’t you say that it is a little too early for you to be giving a lady red flowers?”

“Well, that was—”

“No, I should clarify! He gave me some after I had asked for it!” Dahlia, seeing how troubled the boy was, defended him in his stead. She understood that Raul wouldn’t want Oswald to find out that he had been sucking sage again, so she tried to make it sound as though she were the sole perpetrator.

Oswald turned to her instead. “Miss Dahlia, do you wish to grow intimate with Raulaere?”

“Uh, what exactly do you mean—”

“When a nobleman gives an unwed noblewoman a red flower, that is the meaning it carries,” he explained. “Not that scarlet sage is a flower that carries any meaning of romance; it signifies respect, you see.”

“I’m sorry! This won’t happen again!” Dahlia’s face burned. She had almost become a predator with her unintentional solicitation.

“I should like to resume our lesson if you have no objections.”

“None at all,” Dahlia responded. “Um, would you like to join us as well, Raul? Sea serpent lung is rather uncommon; I hadn’t seen it once in my toolmaking

classes.”

The boy, who was in the middle of standing up to leave, froze in place. It wasn't until now that he'd looked up from the ground. “If it wouldn't be any trouble, father, would you please allow me to sit in on your lesson?”

“That would be no trouble at all. Go on. Sit next to Miss Dahlia there.”

“Excuse me, then.” Raul took the seat next to hers.

The teacher's example hand mirror glinted. “When one projects a flux of magic through powdered sea serpent lung, the enchanted object gains buoyancy. If the magic is insufficient, there will be no reaction at all; however, too much magic and the powder will be blown in all directions. Apply a steady stream of the correct amount of magic for a smooth, level surface,” Oswald said, repeating for Raul's sake the lesson that Dahlia had already received.

Meanwhile, Dahlia checked her notes again. She noticed the sparkling eyes of her classmate—he was obviously in awe of her new spellbook. For whatever reason, she then looked up at their teacher and saw a soft smile appearing on Oswald's face.

“I suppose you should be taking notes too, Raulaere.” Oswald reached under the desk to pull out a black chest. From inside it, he took a thick black leather-bound book that had a beautiful red gemstone inlaid in the center, surrounded by fine spell circles drawn in silver ink. “Here, a spellbook just for you. Bind it to your own blood. If anyone else tries to open it, it will burst into flames. You can leave it here in the workshop.”

The boy couldn't stop staring at the bottom of the front cover, where there were already two words in fancy silver print: Raulaere Zola. It seemed that his father had long ago prepared the book for him. “Father, are you sure? May I really have this?!”

“It is a matter of necessity for every magical toolmaker.”

Oswald was as indirect as could be, but Raul understood him just fine. He excitedly jammed a needle into his pinky; Dahlia winced in pain for him. Afterwards, the three of them continued the lesson. At the edge of the workbench lay the bloom of scarlet sage—free of fragrance yet seeming so

sweet.



After Dahlia had returned home, Oswald and his wives enjoyed some tea in their living room. The lesson had taken longer than expected; the addition of Raul meant that Oswald had had to repeat his lecture, explain things in a simpler way, and guide the two of them through their practice.

It was their first time working with the material, but both Dahlia and Raul had exceeded Oswald's expectations. The few air bubbles in Dahlia's example had bothered her, but the surface of the mirror was astonishingly smooth—proof of her superb fine control over magic. Oswald had watched her second attempt closely, and her mastery of the flow of her magic reminded him of Carlo back when the two men were young. The apple didn't fall far from the tree.

Raul was still a schoolboy and had just stepped into the world of magical toolmaking. His hands-on experience was scant, so today's experiment must've been rather difficult for him. Indeed, his mirror hadn't much of a reflection, but the only imperfections in the surface were a single crease and about ten bubbles. His magic had fluctuated some, but he had enough capacity to make up for it. Raul showed great promise, and Oswald couldn't wait to see how his son would blossom.

Oswald recalled he had been about the same age when he'd first made the same enchantment. He had been full of gusto, but the outcome had looked more like the stormy seas—bubbles like seafoam, creases like waves, and shades of black and blue. It was always in such moments that he'd despaired of ever becoming a magical toolmaker.

Though his experiment had utterly failed as a mirror, he'd had two friends who'd never failed him. However, it was not a story he would tell his student and apprentice. "Hey, that ain't half bad! Title it 'Stormy Seas' and you have an art piece on your hands!" said an older member of the Magical Tool Research Group by the name of Carlo. His attempt to console Oswald brought only a hollow smile to the latter's face.

Then, just as Oswald was about to destroy all evidence of his embarrassing failure, another one of his seniors named Leone snatched it away from him. "I'll

take care of that for you.” Leone was infamous for being a true miser who could never bring himself to throw anything away, so Oswald let him have it, thinking that the failed experiment would end up as a paperweight or something along those lines. The next day, seven silver coins ended up in Oswald’s hands. “Half of what I sold it for,” his friend said. It was little more than trash, but Leone had sold it to a noble, claiming it was the work of a promising rookie glassworker. His current role of master of the Merchants’ Guild was undoubtedly his métier.

“Come in,” Oswald said at the sudden knock on the door, and in came Raul. Ever since he had entered high school, he had become a rare sight here in the living room.

Raul briskly walked up to his father, and, before uttering a single word, bowed. “Father, I apologize for today.”

“There is nothing you need to apologize for,” Oswald answered. “Just make an honest effort.”

“I will!” He beamed. Oswald couldn’t understand why; his words to his son were as dreadful as always, he thought. There was a brief pause before Raul met his gaze again. “Father, is it perhaps that you’re looking to take a fourth wife?”

“No, that is not my intention.”

“I see. I’m going back to my dorm now, then. But, um, when Ms. Dahlia comes back for the next lesson, do you think I could join you again?”

“A fine idea. I shall send out a messenger when we decide on the date. If your schedules line up, then I shall mentor you both. Take care in your dorm. Come home when you have time again.”

“I will...” Raul hesitated. “And, um, thank you again, father.” The teenager bowed again, then took his leave.

Oswald, with a smile on his face, watched his son stand up straight and walk away. *How tall he’s become without me realizing. Curious how that works*, he noted. He was now sure that the image of a young boy sucking nectar out of a sage flower, so clear in his memories, would never appear before his eyes

again, and that made him a wee bit sad.

The father had a feeling that Raul suddenly couldn't wait to become an adult. As much as Oswald wished nothing but the best for him, he didn't know if he could support his son walking down that path. All he knew was that the red flower for which his son yearned bloomed under the watchful gaze of a black-haired guard dog atop a precipitous mountain.

"So, do you think Raulaere has caught the measles?" Oswald asked his wives but received only laughter in response.

"First love is like the measles," a song from an old opera went. "The older you get, the harder it grips you, and the harder it gets to let go." Perhaps love scorched the heart no matter one's age. It wasn't a matter of hoping it would go well for Raul. Rather, Oswald hoped it wouldn't end too poorly and that the scars would fade quickly. It was all that any parent could hope for.

"Miss Dahlia is a little too old for Raulaere, I think."

"Just as you had a thing for older women when you were young!" His first wife Caterina laughed until the green irises of her eyes were hardly visible.

"Surely that difference in age is a little big for someone still in high school."

"Is it really?" His second wife Fiore looked somewhat troubled.

"At this rate, he may just have to vie with the nation's handsomest man..." responded Oswald in a softer voice than before. His wives were sending Raul out to a war he had no chance of winning.

His third wife Ermelinda, with a composed look on her face, cast her verdant eyes at him. "A worthy opponent for our son."

Guarding and Gratitude

“Guess I’ll have to ask my brother...” For a while now, Volf had been searching for someone to train him in personal combat and bodyguarding. He had learned the basics from his good friend Randolph, but being in the Order of Beast Hunters, they had very little opportunity to acquire those skills. Volf’s fellow knights were there for him, but he had figured he needed a professional to study under.

However, it proved to be much more difficult than Volf had expected. He had first asked his seniors, but they found no one qualified. The captain and vice-captain had introduced him to a few of the strongest in the royal guards and the First Knights’ Regiment, but Volf found it too hard to approach them given his position as a Beast Hunter. His seniors had also dissuaded him from doing so, lest it bring him unnecessary trouble. Word was that others weren’t willing to take the risk of getting involved with the Black Reaper or the Dark Lord, even if it meant making some money on the side—cruel for a joke.

In the end, Volf had realized he needed to speak to his brother. He had sent out a messenger, and a reply came almost immediately, Guido saying that it was perfect timing and he was available in the evening. Volf felt guilty; he was almost certain that his brother didn’t just so happen to have time but rather had shifted his schedule for the occasion. They decided to meet after work to have dinner together at the Scalfarotto villa, the house that more or less belonged to Volf.

There were noticeably more servants than usual working, and they had smiles on their faces as they did so; Volf reckoned that was because the heir was coming tonight. He went to his chambers to strangle himself with a necktie and a high-collared shirt—it had been a while since he’d tortured himself so—then headed to the dining hall. “Apologies that you had to take time out of your busy schedule for me, brother.”

Guido was already seated. “Not at all; I had time. Besides, I’m very happy that

you got in touch.” There was no doubt that he, with his light steel-blue hair and sapphire eyes, was their father’s son.

After Volf took the seat across from his brother, they clinked glasses and began their meal. The dining table was far too large for two, the linen far too white, and there were far too many servants standing around as they ate; a noble-like dinner was stifling for Volf—a far cry from his daily meals at the barracks. His glass of wine emptied quicker than usual, and it was only partially because of the day of training he’d had.

“It must’ve been a while since you’ve had a meal here in this villa, Volf,” said Guido, interrupting his brother’s bout of discomfort.

“Yes, it has. I can tell everyone is quite enthusiastic about your presence tonight.”

“I don’t think that’s it, if you ask me. How long has it been since you’ve had a meal here with anyone else?”

As Volf racked his brain, his knife paused midway through cutting into the roast duck. “Not anytime recently,” he lied.

Ever since moving here at the age of ten, he had hardly ever invited friends over for dinner, let alone family. He’d go to the main house when invited, but never had he invited his family here. At first, when he still hadn’t been accustomed to being alone, he had had maids by his side as he ate. But even that became a bother, and he’d stopped when he reached high school. Before he knew it, Volf had fallen into the habit of eating the bare minimum all by himself in the dining room. Once he started living in the barracks, he’d stopped coming back entirely, save for when he had an extended holiday.

“It’s not often that I show up either, and I’m sure it has to be disheartening for the people who work here, so why don’t you make use of this place a little more? Invite your friends or your Beast Hunter pals for a meal from time to time. You’ll be making the chefs feel better too.”

“Thank you, Guido. I’ll do that with your permission, then,” Volf said sincerely. He entertained the thought of inviting guests over for business gatherings; after all, on paper, the Rossetti Trading Company was headquartered here.

The roast duck, crab soufflé, colorful salad, savory soup, and milk sherbet (his childhood favorite)—all were genuinely delicious, and yet, as he put the last spoonful of dessert in his mouth, he could think only of the Green Tower and Dahlia's cooking. There was nothing high-end or otherwise noteworthy about the ingredients she used, but the incredibly tasty meals he ate there always remained prominent in his memory. Volf found joy in the variety of new dishes he had for the first time at the tower, and there were even more that were twists on old classics. There never seemed to be enough time when he was eating and drinking with Dahlia; perhaps he had unwittingly fallen into the hands of the witch of the Green Tower. As Guido heartily cleaned his plate, Volf let out the softest of sighs so as to not ruin his brother's satisfaction.

Their meal quickly concluded, and Volf, Guido, and just one servant moved to the parlor. Steam wafted from the coffees on the table where the Scalfarotto brothers sat diagonally across from each other.

Guido broached the main topic. "Volf, you mentioned you had something to ask me? Oh, and no need to speak so politely; it's just us here anyway."

"Thank you. The thing is that I have been looking for someone to coach me in personal combat and bodyguarding."

"May I ask why? I hope it's not because I said too much last time."

A while ago, when Volf and Dahlia had gone out together, Guido had had someone secretly tail them for their safety. Guido had apologized afterwards, and he'd explained that while he had no doubt in Volf's martial prowess, fighting was "not so easy when you need to protect someone else." Volf couldn't help but think it might be lingering trauma from the coach attack back when they were children. Regardless, Guido had a point, but Volf didn't want him to dwell on it.

"Not at all. Since my mother specialized in that style of fighting and I can't use any magic but my strengthening spell, I thought I should learn it as well."

"You thinking of leaving the Beast Hunters?"

"Sorry, but no."

“Nothing to say sorry for. Of course I want you to stay safe, but know that I don’t plan on dictating your life either.” Guido softly swayed his head from side to side before pressing his fingers into his chin. “Just don’t get picked off by a wyvern again, okay? That scared the living daylights out of me.”

“Speaking of which, I’ve only recently found out that the family sent out quite a lot of people in search of me, so thank you very much for worrying about my well-being.” He hadn’t imagined that they would care enough to send even a single person; he had felt completely abandoned.

“I’ll thank father for you. But we’re family, and that much should be a given. In any case, you made it home all by yourself, so don’t let it weigh on you.”

“It was actually Dahlia who helped me in the forest that day.”

“Oh, is that right? I had heard that a merchant gave you a ride in their carriage that day, but I never knew it was Chairwoman Rossetti herself.” Guido put conspicuous effort into nodding, gesticulating with almost too much animation, as he whitened his coffee with a generous helping of milk.

Volf wasn’t sure if he should, but he continued telling his brother the whole story. He had another request for Guido too, just in case anything were to happen again. “After the wyvern dropped me to the ground, I spent two days wandering through the forest. When I found the road, I would’ve collapsed if it weren’t for Dahlia feeding me a potion. She then took me to the river so I could clean all the blood off myself. Then she fed me and took me to the castle gates. I had so much monster blood in my eyes, I don’t think I would’ve made it back if it weren’t for her.”

“The Scalfarotto name must’ve helped you.”

“No, I, uh, didn’t give out the family name; all I said was that I was but the youngest son of a minor noble.”

“You explained you were with the Order of Beast Hunters, then?” Guido looked completely serious. The pastillage in his hand plunked into his coffee.

“I did, but both my armor and I were covered in so much blood, there was no way she would’ve been able to tell for sure. I could’ve been some two-bit bandit, but Dahlia took my word for it.”

“How many people did Chairwoman Rossetti have guarding her carriage?”

“She was by herself. Well, she understood it was dangerous for a woman to be all alone, so she had disguised herself as a man.”

“I mean, I don’t know what’s normal or not for commoners, but she was all alone? As a woman traveling by herself, she would go that far for a blood-drenched stranger?” He lowered his gaze, as if the question were not directed at Volf.

The servant standing behind Guido answered in a hushed tone, “Unlikely. His words meant little, as Sir Volfred couldn’t prove himself to be a noble or a knight. If it were anyone else, they might have left some food and water for him. Maybe informed a guard in the city if he were lucky. It would be unheard of for a commoner to give a total stranger a ride in their carriage.”

Hungry, parched, and covered in gore and viscera, Volf would have been little but lunch to any scavenging monsters.

“Well, let’s chalk it up to good fortune. Anyway, so Madam Rossetti gave you her address and you went to thank her?”

“No, she didn’t. It was thanks for the Beast Hunters keeping her safe, Dahlia said. She even lent me a coat made of wyvern so I didn’t catch a cold. And then, just like that, she returned home.”

“Huh. No wonder you trust her so much.”

“But wait, there’s more.” Volf put on his spectacles. Not only did his irises turn from gold to green, the shape of his face changed completely; the servant gulped. “Dahlia crafted these for me. They’re made of fairy glass. With these, I’ve finally been able to walk freely around the capital. She’s made me lots of different magical tools as well; the Order too, with waterproof cloth and the compact magical stove.” Volf removed his spectacles and stared silently at his brother for a brief moment. “I owe her my life.” That was all he could say to his brother, but it was the truth. There was so much Volf owed her for—the way she had helped him that day in the forest; let him open up about his past; made the fairy glass spectacles, the sköll bracelet, the magical swords; and had even improved conditions in the field for the Order. But most of all, she considered someone like himself a friend. If that wasn’t benevolence, then he didn’t know

what was.

“A debt of gratitude owed by Volf to Madam Dahlia Rossetti is a debt of gratitude owed by the Scalfarotto family.” Guido spoke in a lower voice than usual.

That caused Volf to raise an eyebrow. Lest his brother offer to throw money at the Rossetti Trading Company, he raced to get a word in. “Brother, I’m very grateful, but having you watch over me is plenty. The Rossetti Trading Company is making fine progress currently, but if there is anything that we need help with, you shall be the first to know.”

“Very well. I’m not about to interfere for no reason anyway. Just be sure to let me know if there’s anything that troubles you or the company, though, okay?”

“I will, thank you very much.” They had only recently resumed speaking on good terms, but Volf had already learned something—not only was his brother extremely overprotective, he made things happen quicker than the blink of an eye. Volf appreciated his concern, though it was a little embarrassing how Guido made everything a big deal.

“How did you find Madam Rossetti again? Since she didn’t give you a way to get in touch.”

Volf punctuated the conversation with a pause. “Coincidence. It just so happened that we saw each other in the city.”

“Hah, like something out of an opera.”

“You exaggerate...” Volf averted his gaze from his brother’s even though Guido seemed interested in hearing more.

The truth was that Volf had been roaming the streets that day in search of Dahlia. He hadn’t gotten a good look at “Dali” in the forest—what with monster blood all over his face—but he’d walked around town in defiance of that fact. By chance, his ears had picked up on a voice similar to hers, and upon closer inspection, that person had had the same scent too (something he found *really* difficult to tell his brother). He could almost have become a predator had he solicited the wrong person.

In hopes of changing the topic, Volf sipped his coffee as he contemplated his

request to Guido; all of this talk about how Dahlia and Volf had met was meant to lead to that, after all. “I have a favor to ask of you, Guido. It has to do with the Rossetti Trading Company.”

“And what is that?”

“In case I ever become a wyvern’s take-out order again or anything like that, I’d like for you to become the company’s guarantor.” It wasn’t an unfounded concern either. “At least in the meantime, until I return home, if possible.”

“Sure. Do make sure you get home quickly if that happens; I’m a busy man, you know.”

“But of course.” The brothers shared a hearty chuckle, just as they once had as boys. Guido’s servant, though, looked quite grim.

“Let’s talk personal combat,” Guido said. “If you want to learn a classic, orthodox fighting style, I could recommend you to someone in the royal guards. But I doubt you’d prefer that, Volf.”

“Right. Some of the other knights also said it might not be the best idea...” He let his sentence trail off ambiguously.

Guido nodded. “I think so too. Get too close to the royal guards and they’ll poach you whether you like it or not. I wouldn’t want you to get married off somewhere abroad under the pretense of becoming a diplomat, especially because it hasn’t been long since you started working in the castle.”

“I don’t think that would happen...”

“Well, it’d be a royal pain if some foreign dignitary were to swing their weight around.”

“Er, does that *really* happen?”

“It’s not unheard of, that’s for sure. The king might intervene if he learns about it, but those kinds of dignitaries care only to benefit their own nation or family.” Guido spoke matter-of-factly and had the indecipherable face of a noble.

Volf felt a certain coldness and, whether he should have or not, he pressed

the matter. “Should I, um, put the best interests of the family first and foremost too?”

“And whatever do you mean by that, Volf?” Guido seemed genuinely unsure. “You’re always bringing honor to the Scalfarotto name as a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters. You’ve been with the Scarlet Armors for some time, defeated a cyclops, and survived being dropped by a wyvern. If you were to retire tomorrow, you’d deserve to kick back and relax. I’ll never allow anyone to butt into your business or otherwise make trouble for you as long as you’re a Scalfarotto.”

“Thank you.” Volf had the feeling that if he were ever to quit the family and become a commoner, Guido would no longer be able to protect him.

“Going back to the subject at hand, there are many different schools of sword fighting against other people. It depends on whether the focus is on offense or defense; for protection duty, you can use an orthodox style, or you could do whatever it takes.”

“I have not given it that much thought, but I suppose I want to do whatever is needed to get stronger and protect others.” Volf finally took his first sip of his coffee; he loved the fragrance, but he’d never really gotten used to the bitter flavor.

Guido sipped his too as he gave the conversation some thought. “There’s someone strong I have in mind, but it might not be easy.”

“If it puts any burden on you, Guido, I would be happier going with someone else.”

“Oh, it wouldn’t be difficult to ask; he might be too busy is all. His sword fighting is quite good, but it’s his guarding and personal combat skills that shine. His top priority is always his client’s survival, and he’s never failed once.”

“May I ask what kind of fighting style he uses?”

“He disarms attackers, and I mean that in the literal sense of the word: he lops off his opponents’ dominant hands. He attacks the legs as well. Oh, I should say, that’s due to his client’s request that he take enemies alive. Otherwise, it’s heads off in a flash,” Guido said, drawing his thumb across his neck. His servant,

standing behind him, cleared his throat, perhaps troubled by such gruesome talk. “Putting it nicely, it’s improvised fighting. Putting it negatively, it’s barbarous. Against mages, he goes for their windpipe or eyes to prevent them from chanting spells or seeing their target. He throws knives and daggers, furniture, rocks, even sand. Anything that can be a weapon *is* a weapon in his hands.”

“Wow.” It seemed that nothing was off-limits as long as he could get the job done. As someone who primarily fought against monsters and trained against fellow knights, it was a very unfamiliar style of fighting to Volf.

“He’s a bodyguard among bodyguards. Very detail-oriented. Though he sometimes goes overboard in a fight. Oh, he nags a lot, is a bit of a worrywart —”

“Sir?”

“And he interrupts my conversation with my brother sometimes. That’s the extent of his faults, though.” Guido quietly chuckled as he looked at his servant. “That’s Jonas, my closest friend, servant, and bodyguard.”

Jonas—a man whom Volf had almost never looked in the eye. His eyes were the color of oxide; his stare was neither particularly cold nor particularly warm, but somewhat inhuman. His hair, tied back in a ponytail, was a shade lighter than his eyes, and he wore a black uniform. Volf hadn’t noticed until now, but Jonas’s build was not a wit inferior to a knight’s. His skin, slightly darker than theirs, gave off the impression that he was from other lands. “My name is Jonas Goodwin, and I am the second son of the Viscounty Goodwin.” Jonas had always been standing behind and waiting on Guido, but this was the first time Volf had heard the servant speak. What’s more, this was the first time Volf had heard that Jonas shared the surname of Volf’s own good friend.

“It is a pleasure to finally exchange introductions. I apologize if this question comes off as impertinent, Mr. Jonas, but would you happen to know a Mr. Randolph Goodwin in the Order of Beast Hunters?”

“He is a distant relative of mine, yes. However, with eleven noble families bearing the name Goodwin and Sir Randolph being from a margravate, I doubt that he is aware of me.”

“Oh, I see.” By that monotonous response, Volf was made aware that the question might have caused Jonas discomfort. At least it didn’t show on Jonas’s face, for whatever that was worth.

“Jonas, could I get you to train Volf? It can be just a brief overview to start off with,” Guido said.

“Lord Guido, my fighting style is unfit for a knight. It might very well be against everything chivalric. Are you certain that Sir Volfred should be learning from me?”

Guido didn’t give him an answer. “Remember this, Volf: if I die, Jonas serves you.”

“Guido!” The two shouted over each other. Judging by his stern look and the way he dropped Guido’s style, Jonas was undoubtedly close to his master.

“Eraldo is still somewhere in the kingdom, but he seems to have no intentions of returning home. If anything were to happen to me, who else but Volf would succeed the family line?”

“Absolutely not! I do not want to think that anything would happen to you, Guido, and the fact of the matter is that Eraldo is next in line. You know that I’m not comfortable with nobility. Even if I were, I don’t have the skills to take your place, let alone command of any of the five major schools of magic. You would do better adopting a relative into the family.” Volf’s barrage of words elicited a stare from Jonas.

Guido silently sipped his coffee before turning to his servant. “Satisfied now, Jonas?”

“Sir Volfred, you should know that I am blighted. I hope you have no qualms about that.”

“I don’t, but I am curious as to what monster it’s from.”

“It happened when I slew a rather large lizard. I must have destroyed its magical core. As the possession proved useful, I have not had it exorcised,” said Jonas indifferently. He began rolling up his sleeve, revealing a rose gold bracelet patterned with a scale motif. “May I take off the bracelet, sir?”

“Go ahead. Volf is a Beast Hunter; he won’t lose his cool.”

“Excuse me, then.”

As Jonas unclasped his bracelet, a chill ran down Volf’s back. It must’ve had a misperception property to it, because Jonas’s right hand was now covered in bright red scales, running from the back of his hand and up his arm. They stopped before his neck; though it was redder than before, it had not become scaly.

“Sir Volfred, is this your first time seeing a possession in person?” he asked, his red tongue flicking behind his teeth.

It was only at Jonas’s slightly concerned tone that Volf realized he had been bracing himself and that his hand was reaching for the sword that wasn’t tied to his waist. “I’m terribly sorry. Forgive me for my reaction. I have seen it in my squadmates many times before, but as they dispel it right away, I’m not quite used to the sight of it.”

“It is only natural that your body reacts the same way it does when facing a monster. Being compatible with the monster means the possession grants me quite the powerful magic, you see.” Jonas resecured his bracelet and his scales disappeared, almost begging the question of whether it had all been an illusion. He rolled his sleeve back down as though nothing had happened.

Was there such a thing as compatibility with a possession? And if so, how would one go about making the perfect match? Could it also render someone like Volf capable of expressing magic? Volf had so many questions but no polite way of asking, so instead, he kept his mouth shut.

Guido shifted almost imperceptibly in his seat yet somehow enough to prompt Jonas to pull his master’s chair out. He stood up and looked at the two of them. Guido’s back was dripping with sweat, proving one thing—“Knights can’t get a single thing into their heads until it’s demonstrated to them, so why don’t you two go spar in the yard?”—his calm demeanor had merely been a facade.

Behind the manor was an open expanse of packed dirt. It wasn’t for anything in particular but could serve as a parking lot when there were many carriages,

an area for training horses, a practice ground, or in any other capacity that might require a large outdoor space. Volf and Jonas faced each other in the middle of the barren patch of land. Guido watched, sitting on a folding chair a ways away; behind him were mages in black robes standing by.

“En garde,” warned Jonas after a quick bow. He readied his sword and advanced with no real urgency.

Volf raised his sword as well. As soon as their swords touched, Jonas pushed downwards and twisted his blade around Volf’s. Volf tried to lift his blade upward in a *derobement*, but the envelopment locked their swords in engagement. Seeing his opponent’s steel creep towards him, Volf instinctively pulled back, causing his sword to abruptly clatter to the ground.

“These training swords lack pliability. A few more clashes with real blades and your hand would be disconnected from your arm,” Jonas said with an aloof air. He picked up the dropped sword and held out the grip towards Volf. “Here.”

“Thank you.”

“Sir Volfred, you seem less than enthusiastic.”

“No. It’s just new to me.” He’d said nothing but the truth, though Jonas’s reaction seemed even less enthusiastic.

“Give him all you’ve got, Volf. Jonas can handle it.”

“Lord Guido, wouldn’t you spare some concern for my well-being?”

“What, and waste it?” Guido, sitting with his legs crossed, seemed worried for neither party. If anything, he looked as though he were waiting for a good show.

Volf readied his sword once again. “No holding back, then.”

“By all means.” Then the two of them were back at it again. Instead of disarming his partner, Jonas deftly alternated attacks to the head, shoulders, chest, arms, and legs. Volf countered with the same.

They were evenly matched, but Volf reckoned that was only because he hadn’t pulled out his trump card. The incoming attacks became stronger, and so he activated his *sköll* bracelet too. It was a tool that he’d use in a real battle, so

it made sense to train with it here. He danced around easier and struck quicker, yet Jonas stood his ground, unmoving. Perhaps it had an opposite—

But Guido's voice interrupted his concentration. "Did you want me to worry about you, Jonas?" he said, almost as soft as a whisper.

"Apologies, Lord Guido." Though the man's expression hadn't changed one bit, it felt like he was hollering internally.

Now, for the first time, Volf felt Jonas's indifferent eyes on him. When a sudden sharp pain struck his brow, Volf intuitively took a half step back. The dull silvery sheen of the training sword flashed before his eyes.

"When the other party means to kill you, you need to go for the kill too. Use your intimidation. Feint and counterattack. You must do something."

The lesson had begun. "All right!" Volf could activate intimidation, but to go for the kill? He had his doubts he could kill *any* human being again, much less his own brother's servant. But this was no time to think—his sword had already been knocked to the ground, and now Jonas's left fist came flying towards him. Instantly, a large bout of magic channeled into his left hand, whether that was a reflex born of training or merely of fear. With the aid of his sköll bracelet, he narrowly dodged out of the way. The punch merely grazed the tip of his nose, yet the scent of blood overwhelmed him.

"See? You just had to put your back into it." Jonas licked his lips. In form, his grin was a human's, yet it seemed to stretch from ear to ear in a manner that appeared reptilian to Volf.

After a beat, Jonas came swinging with full force. Volf meant to parry the attack, but the next thing he knew, he found himself in the air, sent flying by a terrible kick to his arm. It was a miracle he didn't drop his training sword. After fixing his grip, he lunged, only to connect with nothing but air after Jonas kicked his sword away. What followed was an incomprehensible fight.

Jonas was unpredictable with his sword, punches, and kicks. He deceived and fainted again and again. Volf had been doing the same, but it was as if he had telegraphed every move. Before long, all he could do was evade. Volf found himself sent to the skies, crashing to the ground, spun around, his resistance whittled down at every turn. It felt like such a long battle, yet time had lost all

meaning.

“Grk!” A cloud of dust and sand shot up, having been kicked up by his opponent; Volf naturally shut his eyes. Then, a chop to the back of his knee and he slumped onto the ground—or at least, he would have if not for Jonas catching him mid-fall.

“Are you hurt, Sir Volfred?”

“I yield,” he said. “Thank you very much for the lesson, Master Jonas. And please, call me Volf.” As he caught his breath, he dropped to his left knee and lowered his head—a knight’s formal imploration.

The man being begged looked painfully troubled, however. “Erm, Lord Guido?”

“So there you have it, *Master* Jonas. Volf’s in your hands now.”

“Very well.” Jonas looked stoic as ever, but it was obvious that he detested the idea.

Volf felt guilty for his selfish request, but he took the opportunity when it presented itself to him. There was no one he knew who was as strong and dynamic in a fight as Jonas. “You’re incredibly skilled, Master Jonas.” It was a heartfelt compliment.

He smiled with only his eyes. “Me? No. We are before a much more powerful man.”

“Huh?”

“Over there,” Jonas said, pointing over to the knight’s brother.

Guido sat there with his arms crossed. “Hey, don’t look at me. I’m no good with swords.”

“You wouldn’t need one, sir. How about giving Sir Volf some experience going up against a mage?” suggested Jonas.

“I don’t know...”

“I’d love to try, if possible.”

Guido relented and walked over to where Jonas was standing, and Jonas

walked to the chair where Guido had been sitting.

“Ready when you are, Volf.”

“Are you fine being unarmed, brother?”

“I’ll be fine. With my protective bracelet on, I can take a few hits without getting hurt. Hm, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t strike me with full force, though.”

Volf wasn’t fully convinced. “Got it. Here I come, then.” He cautiously ran up to his brother at a slower pace. Guido was an advanced mage and a company leader in the Mages’ Corps. He had once produced enough water to fill ponds, and that when the brothers were still children. Volf reckoned that he’d be blasted by his brother’s water magic if he got too close.

“Ice Shield.” Guido muttered two simple words, but that was enough to blanket Volf’s vision in white.

“Ack!” Volf slammed to a dead stop, with his arm and sword taking the brunt of the impact. It was only then that he realized a sheet of ice had materialized in front of him.

Guido walked around the obstacle, asking worriedly, “Are you okay, Volf?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“It was a favorite of Lady Vanessa’s, this Ice Shield spell. But I guess I’ve overdone it; cleanup is going to be a hassle.”

The chunk of ice was about four meters tall and wide, and—as Volf knew from firsthand experience—rather thick too. “Shield” seemed to be a bit of a misnomer, though; it was more of a wall. Anyway, it must’ve required a lot of magic to cast. “That was amazing, Guido!” There was something unintentionally childish about the way he raised his voice in admiration of his brother.

And just as when they had practiced with swords as children, Guido smiled back. “Thank you, Volf.”

“Lord Guido, the ice should melt harmlessly if we leave it alone. If it does become a nuisance, we can find someone with fire magic to deal with it,” Jonas

chimed in. “And Sir Volf, if this were a real battle, the magic you would be facing would be far worse. Lord Guido’s Ice Lance spreads about three times as wide, and you would have a hard time avoiding it, even as a knight with your strengthening spell.”

There wouldn’t be anywhere to run if his Ice Lance covered three times the area of the shield. Volf would lose the instant the spell was cast, and Guido was incredibly quick with his chanting. “That’s just... Wow.” Volf placed his palm against the sheet of ice, taking in the biting cold.

As conceited as it may have been, Volf figured he must’ve improved somewhat with all the special training he’d received today. First Marcello, now Jonas, and then Guido—he’d climb the ladder one step at a time. Volf had felt evenly matched against the barehanded commoner Marcello. Even with the help of the sköll bracelet, he could only last so long against the bodyguard Jonas. He would have no chance whatsoever against his brother.

Volf wasn’t nearly as strong as he hoped to become, but he wasn’t bitter about it. He knew there was much room to grow through training on his own, studying under Jonas, and absorbing his squadmates’ knowledge. He *wanted* to grow, at the very least to the point where he could protect the ones around him. Volf realized he had been smiling to himself.



On the coach ride back to the main Scalfarotto estate, Guido sank into his seat. The skies beyond the curtained window were likely covered in stars.

Across from him was Jonas, staring his way with wrinkles creasing his brow. “Want a mana potion, Guido?”

“I’m fine. I’ve still got lots left in me.”

Volf had decided to stay overnight in the villa, very much a pleasant surprise for the maids and servants. Even exhausted and caked in dirt as was, he probably couldn’t muster much excitement at the prospects of a hot bath and a good night’s sleep.

Guido had work to finish, and so he had to return home by the end of the

night. Before leaving, though, he had left a note for the maids: crispy bacon, soft scrambled eggs with a splash of cream, and maple syrup-slathered pancakes. His brother's tastes must surely have changed by now, yet Guido was still a touch disappointed he didn't get to see Volf enjoy the flavors of his childhood.

Jonas asked again. "You sure? You exerted yourself earlier."

"I'm sure. I'm glad I've raised my magic by four grades, though; I didn't embarrass myself in front of my brother."

"Don't you even think of raising your magic any more than you have already."

"I know, I know. Even I know five grades is a bad idea." Guido stretched as he responded to his worrywart friend with a yawn. The demonstration this afternoon had drained him, but the late night yesterday hadn't helped either. As soon as the remaining paperwork got squared away, he would tuck himself into bed. "What did you think of Volf?"

"He's overdependent on his physical strength and his strengthening spell. He doesn't seem agile enough, but perhaps that's a fault born of only ever fighting monsters. He falls too easily for feints and other dirty tricks."

"I'll pay you extra. Just teach him well, okay? Make sure he can survive any kind of enemy that comes his way."

"What's gotten into you? You've become so protective all of a sudden."

"I was serious back there when I spoke about what you are to do if anything should happen to me. My little girl is still young. Eraldo has no inclination to come home. The other branches of the family can't be trusted. That leaves only Volf. Even if he doesn't have any desire to succeed the family line, I'm not so sure it'll be up to him to make that decision."

"If you ask me, I think you oughta sire another heir or take another wife."

"I don't want to become my father." Guido didn't mean for it to be, but his retort was biting. Jonas leaned back into his seat, and he would add nothing to that conversation for the rest of the journey home. The two of them sat in the coach accompanied by nothing but the regular squeaking of the wheels.

It was a while before Jonas piped up again. “If you want me to train Sir Volf, I have two conditions for you.”

“Fine, as long as they’re in my power,” answered Guido before he even asked for the details.

“Just like today, make sure there are mages capable of healing magic on standby. They may be training swords, but they can still cause terrible injuries. Secondly, you’ll have to attend too. If I lose control, I’m trusting you to freeze me in a block of ice.”

“It sounds like you think Volf has a lot of potential.”

Jonas looked stunned—perhaps appalled—by Guido’s excitement. “That I don’t know. What I *do* know is that back there, he didn’t give it his all.”

“I mean, *I* don’t think he was holding back against you.” The way they clashed against each other had been dizzying and even alarming. Guido would have hated to see either of them hurt. It had been plain to see that Jonas was stronger, so that should have left Volf no leeway to take the fight easy.

“No. There was a bit more that he could have given. When Sir Volf went up against me, the color in his eye didn’t change a bit.”

“What, does that happen to knights? Their eyes change color in battle?”

“Doesn’t it happen to you mages too? It happens to every warrior when they get serious, don’t you know? Although now that I think about it, I’ve never seen the color of *your* eyes change. Ever.” Jonas cast his gaze downwards, as though he were racking his brains. But he seemed unable to recall whatever he was searching for.

“That speaks to your skills. Well, when the time comes, you’ll see.”

“I’d rather the color not change, not for the rest of your life.”

Guido responded only with laughter.

The Adventurers' Guild

The sun beat down as a stiff breeze blew, like a reminder to Dahlia and Ivano of the season. They were calling on the Adventurers' Guild today both for business and to collect the bicorn order. The Order of Beast Hunters had slain one, and instead of taking it back to the castle and butchering it themselves, they'd had the Adventurers' Guild part it out, as its parts were in high demand.

Newer than the Merchants', the Adventurers' guildhall was a grand building constructed of red brick and stacked five stories tall. It was further divided into two wings: the left was for adventurers to contract jobs or sell materials; the right was for guests to do business. The adventurers' side appeared bustling, teeming with adventurers passing in and out. Dahlia almost succumbed to her curiosity and opened the door to see what that side was like, but she came to her senses and entered the correct one for her.

As soon as she did so, a familiar voice called out to her. "If it isn't Miss Dahlia. Quite the pleasant coincidence." It came from a silver-haired man adorned with silver-rimmed glasses. Behind him stood his wife Ermelinda. After both parties greeted each other, Oswald produced a sheet of red parchment that contained his order. "I am here to pick up bicorn parts. I assume you are here for the same reason?"

"That's right. I received their notification saying that it was ready," replied Dahlia. Word that the Beast Hunters had defeated a mutant bicorn must've spread around already, and other magical toolmakers were bound to come by too.

"Shall we go through a lesson on bicorn parts soon, then?"

"Yes, please!" Mutant bicorn parts were extremely rare; Dahlia had never enchanted with parts from such a monster before. Just imagining the effects of the different parts and what tools could be made with them made her heart race.

Oswald placed his right hand over his chest and made an elegant bow,

interrupting the excitement swimming around in Dahlia's head. "Forgive my tardiness, but I offer my congratulations to you, Chairwoman Rossetti, on becoming an official purveyor to the Order of Beast Hunters, their advisor, and a baroness."

His sudden formality sent Dahlia into a fluster. "Oh, please, Mr. Oswald, the whole advisory role thing is only in name, and it isn't as though my barony has been confirmed yet either..."

Ivano stepped beside her and put in, "Chairman Zola, thank you very much for your kindness. This was only possible due to your care and guidance. As our company is still green, we would be fortunate to have your continued support."

"You pass, Ivano. As for you, Dahlia," Oswald said in a low, frosty tone, "you need extra work." He glared.

Ermelinda tugged softly at her husband's sleeve. "It is almost time, dear."

"Oh, indeed. Shall we, then? Miss Dahlia, I shall see you at our next lesson." Oswald reverted to his usual calm demeanor and, after excusing himself, went up to the second floor with his wife.

Once they were out of earshot, Dahlia let out a heavy sigh. *Professor Oswald* was apparently quite demanding of his students with regards to both toolmaking and their conduct as businesspeople. The prospect of their next lesson seemed ever so daunting.

"From now on, chairwoman, you'll have many more chances to get it right." The employee's words of encouragement struck fear into the boss, now staring off into the distance.

After Dahlia regained her composure and checked in at the front desk, she and Ivano were quickly conducted to the top floor of the building. The first item on the agenda today was to pay respects to the vice-guildmaster Augusto. She had recently learned from Grato that Augusto had sent a letter endorsing the Rossetti Trading Company the day she had made her big presentation at the castle, and so she had come to deliver a thank-you letter.

Dahlia had also wanted to discuss the matter of slime farming with the guildmaster, though unfortunately, he was a hard man to get a hold of, as he

returned to the capital just once or twice a year. Not only did the guildmaster travel between every branch location, he was an active adventurer who personally hunted monsters for those exceptionally rare materials. Augusto was the de facto guildmaster, Dahlia had learned from Volf.

“Welcome, Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“Mr. Scarlatti, thank you very much for giving me your time today.” Having exchanged greetings in the drawing room, Dahlia sat down on the dark brown sofa as instructed. Her seat was cool to the touch even in the summer heat; she surmised that it could only be made from enchanted monster leather.

“Though I would love to take the time to chat, I’m afraid that I have an engagement at the castle,” Augusto explained, apologizing for giving them such a limited time slot. More likely than not, he had gone out of his way to make time for today’s visit.

Ivano handed Dahlia a pair each of the compact magical stoves and zephyricloth scarves, and she then presented the wrapped gifts to Augusto.

“Is this *the* zephyricloth?” Augusto’s sienna eyes narrowed in a smile; Dahlia could only presume that he, too, suffered in formal clothing in the heat. “My wives have been begging me for anything I could get, be it scraps or patches. Thank you so much.” *Wives*—Dahlia still wasn’t used to hearing the word in the plural.

“Mr. Scarlatti, I apologize if I am overstepping boundaries as a mere employee of our company, but you have two wives and how many daughters again?”

“Two each, actually.” The man with the indigo hair turned dead serious under Ivano’s questioning.

“In that case, please have these as well.”

“You are far too kind. Thank you.” Augusto politely accepted the two extra scarves that Ivano retrieved from his case. Dahlia silently watched the ritualistic exchange. “I will be sure to give extra attention to the green slime farming operations. If there ever is anything I can do for you, please let me know right away.”

The brief meeting wrapped up with everyone in high spirits, and the

representatives of the Rossetti Company took their leave of the drawing room.

“I didn’t realize you brought a stock of zephyricloth with you, Ivano.”

“Yes, I had heard that he has two wives, but I wasn’t sure how many children he had. As fathers, we always want to prove ourselves to our children, you see.” Ivano smiled as they walked down the hallway.

“And he can prove himself by handing those out?” The so-called scarves were a nicer weave of gauze in an undyed pale green color, lacking in patterns or styling. They would undoubtedly be out of place in a nobleperson’s ensemble.

“They may very well be cutting the scarves up and tucking the pieces underneath their clothing. Zephyricloth is said to be a status symbol right now, you know, for those who can get their hands on it.”

“Wait. A status symbol?” A green slime was hopping around in Dahlia’s head. She had a hard time tying that image to anything prestigious.

“According to what I’ve heard from Mr. Forto, noblewomen have been replacing their necklaces with our scarves at balls so that their hair flows elegantly. Meanwhile, noblemen have been sewing them under their cuffs so as to direct a cool stream of air at their partners on the dance floor. Given that it’s Mr. Forto who is distributing our products to that market, I wouldn’t be surprised if all these clever ideas came from him as well. Nobles are always vying to be at the forefront of fashion, especially the ladies.”

Dahlia worried for a moment that the venue was too public for this conversation until she saw the red glint reflecting off of Ivano’s cuff links—he had already activated his anti-eavesdroppers. “Huh. I wouldn’t know.” She’d never had much interest in the latest trends, despite being a member of said group, videlicet “ladies.”

When Dahlia was still engaged, Lucia had lambasted her for wearing clothes that were “a few generations out of style” or “too boring even by granny’s standards.” Lucia still routinely gave Dahlia a thorough check from head to toe, even though Dahlia had improved to “just barely acceptable.” Though Dahlia cared for the latest and the greatest in magical tools, she only cared for whatever was comfortable when it came to clothes. However, as a chairperson

who frequented the castle grounds, Dahlia “ought to present herself respectably,” as Gabriella, vice-guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild, had warned her. Dahlia realized she couldn’t appear slovenly when she was by Volf’s side, and as such, she accepted as much of Lucia’s advice as possible.

“Oh, where did the time go? Sorry, chairwoman—I must return to the Merchants’ Guild for a meeting. I will be back to pick you up afterwards.”

“Don’t you worry about me. After I have them load my materials into a carriage, I’ll head straight home.”

Ivano’s navy blue eyes looked awfully worried. “Are you sure you want to meet with Mr. Tasso by yourself? I wouldn’t mind postponing my—”

“I’m sure. This apology has to come from me—from the Rossetti family.”

Ivano’s expression failed to soften. He kept silent as he handed her a package—something to offer Jean as part of her apology.

After taking a deep breath, Dahlia approached the drawing room on the second floor where Jean was already waiting. The door, which was watched by a guard, had been left ajar, likely so that it’d be a little more welcoming for a woman.

Jean Tasso, head of materials, had chestnut hair. Dahlia had first met him when he and Augusto had visited the Merchants’ Guild to discuss the manufacturing of the toe socks and drying insoles. At that meeting, he had been sitting in front of Dahlia and had yelled at her for making unreasonable requests for materials. She had understandably been quite shocked, but she’d come to sympathize with him when she learned his side of the story.

Jean had been the one who personally sourced the kraken for her father Carlo’s hot water dispenser, the sand lizard for his dryers, and the mountain of blue slimes for Dahlia’s waterproof cloth. The series of events had caused many fissures in his family life—he had divorced soon after his first marriage, and his second wife had taken their children back to her family home. Jean was well within his rights to despise the Rossettis, and Dahlia couldn’t see him ever forgiving them.

When Dahlia entered the room and bowed, Jean set down his paperwork. “Welcome, Chairwoman Rossetti. Please come in,” he said after standing up from his seat. “Congratulations on your new role as the Order of Beast Hunters’ official purveyor and as their advisor on magical tools.” Word traveled surprisingly fast.

Dahlia focused her mind and responded appropriately. “Thank you very much for your kind words. I shall endeavor to overcome my inexperience, and I look forward to continuing to achieve success together.”

He lightly nodded in acknowledgment before taking one step backwards and making a bow so deep that his head nearly touched his desk. “I humbly apologize once again for my insolence during our last meeting.”

“You needn’t apologize! Please raise your head!” She was frantic in her pleading. “I only learned after our meeting about how much trouble we—the Rossetti family—have caused you and your family with our demands for materials...”

“The fault lies squarely on me for venting my anger at you and completely losing my head. I stayed up two nights before the meeting, which led to my disgraceful actions.”

Though he said it as though it were nothing, the fact that he’d stayed up two nights in a row struck a nerve in Dahlia—she had already died once from overwork. She failed to conjure the right words in her mind, so instead, she spoke from the heart. “Mr. Tasso, I would be grateful if you would accept this as an apology for the troubles we Rossettis have caused you.” Her father should have been here apologizing as well, but Dahlia was the last one left in the family. She had turned to Ivano for help with the gift, which consisted of two compact magical stoves, two zephyricloth scarves, and one bottle of top-shelf brandy.

“I should be the one apologizing, yet here I am receiving a present from you with much gratitude. Thank you, as well, for your continued business, and I ask you to please call me Jean.”

“Thank you for accepting my apology. Please call me Dahlia as well. I hope to turn to you for help with materials from now on.”

“I will gladly lend my help with whatever I can.”

After they got their long greetings over with, the two of them were finally able to take a seat. Jean handled the packaged stoves and thanked her once again. However, after realizing that the gift included a pair of fire crystals bundled in a thin cloth, he furrowed his brow. “Chairwoman Rossetti—er, Miss Dahlia,” he said as he brought up his gaze from the desk, “forgive my saying so, but as it may potentially cause misunderstandings with others, I wouldn’t recommend placing fire crystals on top of a present like this.”

“Huh? Oh! I didn’t mean it like that!” yelped Dahlia. As she was leaving the house earlier today, she had casually bundled up the pair of crystals as a power source for the stoves. In Ordine, to be “struck in the chest with a fire crystal” was an idiom for falling in love, and so giving someone a fire crystal was, needless to say, a declaration of love. Dahlia had heard of the custom when she was in school but had long forgotten—or more accurately, it had never been relevant to her, since she had neither given nor received a fire crystal for that reason. “And, um, I’d never do that for anyone else either!”

“There’s no need to fret, Miss Dahlia. Again, I won’t misconstrue your words, but, erm...” Fortunately, Jean was an understanding man; it was only now that Dahlia understood she had essentially said that her love was only for him.

Ashamed of her own panicked reaction, she was about to cover her face with both hands, but she caught herself at the last moment and forced herself into a proper posture. Blushing and getting into a fluster now would only send the wrong signal; she controlled her breathing, though her eyes were a little teary. “I hope you can forgive me for everything.”

“Not to worry. Please forget about it; I shall do the same,” Jean said, reassuring her. “By the way, Miss Dahlia, have you ever been told you take after your father?”

“Quite often, actually...”

“I can see why.”

Though Dahlia herself couldn’t see why, she was glad that Jean dropped the subject and allowed her to bring up another matter. “I have brought along a list of materials that I may be interested in using for my next creation. Could I

trouble you to give it your perusal when you have the time?”

“Thank you for compiling it in writing. This will help immensely. I have heard from Lord Fortunato regarding your need for green slimes, and a large expansion is already in the works at the slime farm.”

That’s why Forto was the guildmaster of the Tailors’ Guild: he was always a step ahead. And given that they were already planning an expansion to the slime farm, the Adventurers’ Guild was right on his heels. “The slime farm—that is to the east, correct?”

“Indeed. Currently, about seventy percent of the slimes there are of the blue variety, with very few of any other type. Would you by chance care to pay it a visit?”

Dahlia leaned over the desk. “May I really?!” She had always wanted to do so, and she especially wanted to see the slime vats.

“But of course. You, erm, seem very interested.”

“Yes! Sorry, I’ve just always wanted to see the farm for myself!”

It must have been rather funny seeing a grown woman get as giddy as a child, and Jean failed to keep himself from chuckling. He excused himself, stifled his laughter, and then collected himself again. For better or for worse, neither of them was tense around the other anymore. “How about inviting Sir Scalfarotto on your visit? It would be valuable to get his insight on wild slimes.”

“Thank you for the offer. I will get back to you with our availability as soon as possible.” If anything, it would be even more fun going with Volf. She made a mental note to send him a letter immediately after getting back to the tower, and she prayed that their schedules would match up.

“Shall we go over your order next? Inside are horn, core, hide, bone, and hoof, all harvested from a purple variant of bicorn.” From a cart behind him, Jean brought out a large, silvery chest, sealed with magic. As soon as he opened it, a blast of magical energy radiated from inside. The black horn, likely capable of inducing hallucinations, distorted the image of the objects around it. Dahlia knew better than to touch anything in there, at least not before she received handling instructions from Oswald. After she’d inspected the contents, Jean

closed it back up and wound its cord. “The chest is rather heavy, so allow me to fetch some staff to load it onto your carriage.” As he was returning it to the cart, his legs gave out. He managed to prop himself up on his desk with both arms, but he remained immobile for a moment.

“Mr. Jean! Are you okay?!”

“I’m okay,” he said, obviously pale in the face. Veins bulged on the backs of his hands. “Just got light-headed for a moment.”

“I understand that it’s not my place to say so, but please do take better care of yourself.”

“Thank you for your concern, but my body can take a beating. It isn’t as though I collapsed.”

He damn nearly had, though! And his words, a familiar echo of someone she had known, struck a nerve again. They ached in her chest, and she couldn’t help but speak up. “My father once said the same.”

“Excuse me?”

“I always nagged him about taking better care of himself, and he would say that he was tough and that he had never collapsed before. He continued to neglect his health and never collapsed once until he finally did. Then he never woke up again.”

“I, uh... My condolences.”

“That isn’t what I’m trying to get at. It’s...” Dahlia paused to find the right words. “The family you’d leave behind would miss you dearly, so please treat yourself well.” She wasn’t sure if those were the right words either, given that she was neither friend nor family to him. But she still had to say something.

“Again, thank you for the concern, Miss Dahlia. But seeing as my family has already left me as of last week, I don’t foresee it being a problem. Besides, you needn’t worry, as this has nothing to do with you. This is purely a personal problem.”

“Mr. Jean, I—”

“I thought I could do something about it, but, well, it seems as though I’m too

hard to love.”

Jean’s quiet grumbling resonated with Dahlia; she was reminded of how her engagement had ended. She had thought she could please Tobias, make him need her, but that had been little more than wishful thinking. She was unlovable as a woman—the thought had ceaselessly plagued her mind. Perhaps it still did.

“I apologize for digressing. Living happily by myself may actually be a noble pursuit. The only real problem is not having someone to drink with,” Jean said. “Oh, and it won’t be long until I can get you the black slime you are looking for, as I shall personally hunt some myself. Despite appearances, I am an advanced adventurer, after all.”

“There’s no rush at all. Just make sure you take care of yourself first...” The topic had changed very suddenly, and now something else popped into Dahlia’s mind: a former adventurer like Jean must enjoy a stiff drink. “Um, Mr. Jean, I’m wondering if you have a taste for scorpio.” As the name suggested, the high-proof liquor was infused with a scorpion in the bottle. It was rather divisive.

“It’s certainly one I enjoy, yes.”

That brought a smile to her face. “Mr. Oswald—er, Chairman Zola also enjoys it, you see.”

“He does? That surprises me, I must say.”

“Yes, and he told me that he too has been having a hard time finding a drinking partner. If you are interested, perhaps I could introduce the two of you?”

“I would appreciate that, thank you. It is always helpful to get to know other business owners.”

Perhaps Jean was just being polite, but Dahlia rushed to the guard standing by the door and asked him to fetch Oswald if he was still in the guildhall. When she separated from her fiancé, it had helped her to be surrounded by friends, and she wished the man sitting across from her wouldn’t have to deal with his troubles alone. Dahlia had heard that when Oswald’s then-wife had left him, he’d had her father Carlo to chat and drink with. She hoped to ask Oswald, with

his colorful life experiences, to help Jean out the same way. She felt sorry that she wasn't any more capable of helping Jean—and felt sorry, too, for dumping the problem onto her teacher.

Before long, an employee of the guild led Oswald and his wife into the room. Dahlia explained the scorpio situation, which brought a grin to his face. “Why, that is wonderful news! Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Oswald Zola of the Zola Company. Though we have had the pleasure of conducting business together many times before, I believe it is the first time that we have actually met face-to-face. It is a pleasure to finally do so, Mr. Jean Tasso.”

“I am very touched that you remember me by name, Chairman Zola.”

Their friendly introductions, perhaps because they were acquainted already, brought Dahlia relief.

“Thank you as well to Chairwoman Rossetti for introducing us. And now that we are friends, would you care to join me in my home for an indulgence of scorpio? Just the two of us, man to man, and we can drop the formalities. I have bottles white, black, and red waiting for you and your tales of adventure, Mr. Tasso.”

“That sounds delightful, thank you.”

“Would you happen to be free in the evenings?”

“For the next four nights or so, yes.”

“Sounds like a plan, then. After work in two days' time, I shall come by the guild with a carriage.”

Oswald had undeniable interpersonal skills, honed by his many years in business. All parties then said their goodbyes and left the drawing room.

Dahlia and the Zolas were making their way down to the carriage station. An employee of the guild had already brought down her magically sealed chest, and so the only other piece of luggage was her leather briefcase.

“Miss Dahlia, thank you for introducing me to Mr. Tasso. As a child, I was

fascinated by adventurers, so you can imagine that I am very excited to hear his tales.”

That nearly brought her to a stop. “Did you want to become an adventurer yourself, Mr. Oswald?” To Dahlia, he seemed much more the scholarly type, and she couldn’t see him as an adventurer; she would’ve expected him to have aspired to become a mage or a toolmaker.

“It was a dream and only that; I never had good enough reflexes for that sort of thing.” He chuckled, perhaps wistfully.

“My husband absolutely adores tales of adventure,” Ermelinda said. “I could tell him the same story a dozen times and he would still gobble it up all the same.”

Dahlia figuratively scratched her head. “Stories, like about adventuring?”

“Oh, I must’ve failed to mention before, but my wife Ermelinda was formerly an adventurer, and an advanced one at that.”

“You were?! Wow, that’s amazing, Ms. Ermelinda!” Dahlia marveled, as advanced adventurers could take on powerful monsters. Ermelinda looked to her like just another noblewoman, but she must have been a tough warrior.

“Oh, thank you, but that was just me being reckless ages ago.” She bashfully cast her scallion-green eyes downwards. Battling monsters did indeed require a bit of recklessness, but she seemed most natural standing by her husband’s side.

“You had best bet that she is much stronger than I am. In fact, my beautiful, strong wife could double as my guard,” Oswald said, almost as if to boast, though his eyes narrowed slightly.

His change in expression caught Dahlia’s attention, but they couldn’t detain the carriages, which were just now ready to depart. They dipped their heads in farewell, but just as she was about to turn away, the silver-eyed man whispered softly, “I do my utmost to avoid getting in any kind of quarrel with her.”

The Slime Farm and Nectar Wine

Two days after Dahlia called on the Adventurers' Guild came the long-awaited visit to the slime farm. Unsurprisingly, it was beyond the city walls, just outside the eastern gates. The site was surrounded by a tall black brick fence, and the only interruption in the masonry was for the blocky iron gates. Though the exterior might have had the look and feel of a maximum security prison, the area inside the gates was anything but—a lush lawn covered most of the ground and the nursery building was unexpectedly small.

Accompanying Dahlia were Volf and Ivano. When she wrote to Volf to invite him on this trip, his reply had been instantaneous. He had given four dates that would work for him, of which she then selected the earliest one before sending a messenger to the Adventurers' Guild. Dahlia had been afraid of coming too soon, but she reasoned that the workers would have more free time now than after the expansion began.

The response from the Adventurers' Guild said that she should feel free to invite others as well, and so she did. Forto, master of the Tailors' Guild, had declined, as he had visited three times already. Dahlia had gotten shut down completely by Gabriella of the Merchants' Guild, who claimed she was far too busy. Curiously, just minutes before that conversation, Gabriella had asked Dahlia if she would like to go get makeup and pancakes. Lucia had also immediately rejected the offer, saying, "See live slimes?! I wouldn't go even if you threw money at me!" If it were anything to do with zephyricloth, though, she would've jumped at the opportunity to watch larvae poop out silk.

Within the gates, a woman with sky blue hair was waiting at the carriage stop. "Welcome to our facility, members of the Rossetti Trading Company. I am the chief researcher Idaealina Nicoletti; please call me Idae for short." She looked to be younger than Dahlia, but given her seniority, Idae had to be at least the same age, if not a little older. She was slightly shorter than the toolmaker too, and she wore a pair of navy-rimmed glasses and a gentle expression.

“Thank you very much for the invitation. My name is Dahlia Rossetti, chairwoman of the company. Please call me by my first name as well.” Afterwards, Volf and Ivano introduced themselves as one of the company’s guarantors and as an employee, respectively.

From the carriage stop, it took more than a few steps to get to the nursery. The distance was likely by design, as the horses might have startled the slimes. On top of that, the heavy exterior door was wrought from iron. Idaea opened it with two separate keys, and once everybody went inside, she locked it again. “I apologize if it makes you uncomfortable. We keep all doors locked just in case anything were to happen.”

“Safety first!” Dahlia replied. The doorknobs were mounted on bright plates of sealsilver, while the walls on both sides were inscribed with large magic circles. Presumably, they would conjure up air and fire magic upon activation and engulf the corridor in a sea of flames. Dahlia didn’t want to speculate about the reasons the facility might need measures like these, but security here was thorough, to say the least.

“First, let me take you to our blue slime tanks,” Idaea said. Passing through a set of doors with blue decorative signs, she led the party to a large room containing a dozen or more cuboid vats. All sides of the enclosures but the tops were made of glass; the way the sunbeams from the clerestory windows refracted into beautiful rainbows made it obvious that the lids were made of a crystalline material of some sort. “As slimes can be surprisingly powerful, the tops are constructed out of magic-sealing crystal to prevent them from escaping.”

When Dahlia approached a tank that contained an ooze of little ones, Idaea explained that they were one-week-old specimens. The blue slimes, each no more than the size of a table tennis ball, meandered together when Idaea inserted a coarse-ground meal of vegetable and meat scraps into the tank. Their bodies jiggled as they chowed down. The monsters didn’t show any apprehension about the presence of people; if anything, they seemed eager to gather around Idaea as she fed them.

“I didn’t know slimes could be so friendly,” said Dahlia.

“They’re a lot more docile when they’re still young.”

Slimes wouldn’t be a welcome sight in a jungle or a bog, but like this? They were adorable little things. At this rate, Dahlia might just get a fish bowl and keep one herself.

Idaea continued, “These specimens here are four weeks old. Once they reach this size, we can take them outside.”

The ones in this vat were quite a bit larger, about the size of two palms. Seventy to eighty percent of the slimes Dahlia had encountered in her school days had been at this stage. She approached the tank and peered through the glass. The slimes’ gelatinous, round, translucent blue bodies wiggled as they bounced around, almost as if they were playing together. There was a log in the middle of their enclosure. Whether it was part of their habitat or for food, it seemed to be quite popular; many of the blue slimes either gathered around or stuck onto it.



Dahlia contemplated how much waterproof cloth could be made from a slime of this size. These farmed slimes also seemed a tinge paler than wild specimens. Did their composition differ? Was there a difference when enchanting with one or the other? The barrage of questions coursed through Dahlia's mind as she pressed her face against the side of the glass. As she did, though, the blue slimes began slowly retreating to the other side of the tank.

"Oh..." Something about Dahlia must have scared them off. Perhaps the blue slimes had heard her thoughts, or perhaps they knew that she had culled their kind. There were too many plausible reasons, and Dahlia sighed softly to herself.

"What do you know? They're kinda cute like this." Even Volf had had his heart melted into goo. As if oblivious to her sigh of sorrow, he reached his hand towards another part of the tank. The slimes there, too, flung themselves in the opposite direction, with some even smacking against the glass on the far side. "Maybe the feeling isn't mutual..."

"You and me both..."

Idea interrupted their commiseration. "Oh, um, could I please ask you two to not get so close to the enclosures? The blue slimes are quite delicate, and they're especially skittish around strangers."

In spite of what she said, Ivano, standing slightly away from Dahlia and Volf, had a blue puddle gathered in front of him. His face was near the glass wall as well, but the slimes didn't seem to be wary of him. Dahlia cursed silently in envy of his popularity. Ivano must've caught her glare, because he turned around and laughed. "It may very well be because my dirty blond hair looks like a delicious pile of freshly fallen leaves. Perhaps your fiery red hair scared them away, Ms. Dahlia."

"My hair is black like rich soil, yet they didn't take a liking to me..." moaned Volf.

"Sir Volf, be proud! Obviously, you are exuding the might of a Beast Hunter." Ivano's exaggeration did little to soothe Volf's mood.

Suddenly, the sparkle of a pair of hyacinth eyes stole their attention. "Is that

true, Sir Scalfarotto? Are you really a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters?!” She got so close that she all but pinned Volf against the tank.

“Um, yeah, I am, but—”

“Oh, I’ve got so many questions for you! Like, are wild blue slimes more aggressive than the specimens here? I’ve also read that they attack you if you simply walk past them; is that true?”

“No, they generally don’t attack unless provoked. Though if you, say, accidentally step on one or trespass in their territory, they may attack.”

Idaea took a notepad from the breast pocket of her lab coat and jotted down notes as she continued the impromptu interview. “I see. And what is the maximum size for a wild slime?”

“The largest blue slime I have seen was about two-thirds my height. It swallowed up a large deer, so it was quite wide as well.”

“Did it only have a single magical core?”

“I didn’t check myself, but a fellow knight struck it down with one thrust of his spear, so I would presume so.”

Idaea pressed on, scribbling as she rapidly fired off questions at Volf; Dahlia felt an odd sense of kinship with her.

“Thank you very much. Your knowledge will help immensely,” the director said. “Oh, and Ms. Dahlia, may I ask you for your opinion on these tanks as well?”

First Volf and now her. “Let’s see... I imagine it would be hard to replicate their natural habitat, but it might be a little too bright here for the blue slimes. They tend to prefer darker surroundings, I believe.” Dahlia recalled instances when blue slimes had escaped captivity in the tower and hidden in the shadow of shelves and buckets.

Idaea nodded enthusiastically. “I see, I see! The bright illumination helps with observation, but maybe it’s what’s retarding their growth. I think I’ll wrap one enclosure with a cloth and leave one uncovered to see which they prefer.” The two of them continued to discuss the ideal water compositions and

temperatures as well as the unique traits of slimes.

Volf, now free from the bombardment, stepped slowly away from the two women. His shoulders rose and fell with a sigh of relief.

Ivano approached the knight, who was hoping to turn invisible, and whispered, “I think you’re fine. They’ve only got slimes on their minds, and I don’t hear them mentioning anything about you at all.”

“Oh, good.”

“Just like Ms. Dahlia and Ms. Lucia, I don’t think Ms. Idaeia will, erm, succumb to anything.”

“I know. It’s just, well, I’m too self-conscious...”

“You say self-conscious, I say self-protective.”

The four of them then finally made their way down the corridor and to the next slime room. Hanging from the set of doors was a green sign, presumably an indication of what was inside.

“In here we have the green slime enclosures,” Idaeia said as she opened the door. This next room was about a third of the size of the previous one and its many skylights filled the room with sunbeams. Basking in the rays were green slimes, all slightly larger but flatter than the blues. “Green slimes don’t generally pose any threat to adventurers, and so we have quite the gaps in our knowledge about their ecology. I’m not sure if it’s because they are raised here instead of in the wild, but they seem to be as lethargic as old folks sunbathing. And they don’t eat much either, even though they grow quite quickly.”

“Could it be that green slimes photosynth—er, I mean, they likely get nutrition from sunlight, just as plants do.” Not that schools in this world didn’t teach that flora needed sunlight to grow, but Dahlia stopped herself because the specific term wasn’t used.

“Oh, I see! That makes a lot of sense. I apologize for being so ignorant about these creatures. Do you by any chance have resources on slimes that you could share with me?”

“I don’t recall if I read about it anywhere... It’s likely that the topic has come

up before with my friends or teachers.” The topic had indeed come up between her and her father—both friend and teacher to her, so Dahlia wasn’t exactly lying. Carlo had understood the concept of photosynthesis readily, but he’d then asked in all earnestness why humans couldn’t sit in the sun and grow in the same way. Dahlia had never once brought up the topic again.

“That’s quite all right. You have been very helpful already. I’ll run an experiment and see if they prefer a nice, sunny enclosure!” Idaeia exclaimed with a smile bright and warm.

Up next was an even smaller room for the yellow and red slimes. The former huddled together at one edge of their tank, demonstrating that they were social monsters. Apparently, they would even suffer diminished appetite if their ooze lost a member. The yellow slimes remained motionless in the party’s presence until their dear caretaker Idaeia approached.

The red slimes, however, were a lively and nimble bunch—much more animal-like than the previous three types. Each had its own territory within the enclosure; they did not congregate. Out of the four, red slimes were the least frequently encountered in the wild, and even Volf hadn’t come across many. They were particularly curious as well, moving closer to the humans beyond the panes of glass. Though Idaeia was again the most popular, Volf exulted in the fact they would gather near him at all. Dahlia observed them carefully as well.

After taking in the sights of the four types of slimes, the four people proceeded down the hall, passing several guards along the way. Separating them from their final destination was a single door as black as pitch and covered in red fire magic circles, and Idaeia took out a key just as black to unlock it. “Beyond this door is one single black slime. Though we would love to perform some research on it, we’re limited by the fact that it hasn’t changed or split at all since this facility was founded.”

Volf frowned, drawing deep lines across his brow. “A black slime...” he grunted.

The open space inside the vat for the black slime was rather small, but the glass sides were very thick. Idaeia explained that the vat was double paned: the inner layer of glass had been enchanted with hardening magic; the outer layer

was magic-sealing crystal—impregnated glass that had been specially crafted for this application. Even the skylights in this room were made with the same special magic-sealing glass—an appropriate measure, considering the danger contained in this room.

There the handball-sized black blob sat in the middle of the case, unmoving even with four people having drawn near. It had been a while since Dahlia had last examined one up close, and she only now realized that its body was a vitreous black and barely translucent—not unlike obsidian, she noted. Unlike other slimes, this type radiated a powerful magical energy. After a period of examination, the black slime began to slowly move towards Dahlia. Then, a chill struck her. As she stepped back from the glass, the sight of Volf’s back appeared before her. Something about his broad shoulders put a cold, heavy feeling in her chest.

“V-Volf?” When Dahlia called out his name subconsciously, a cracking sound came from somewhere. It turned out that the black slime was slamming itself against its tank, jolting her out of her trance. Though the pane of crystal had been enhanced to protect it from physical and magical attacks, the slime’s concentrated force managed to put a hairline crack in it.

“Do *not* agitate the black slime!” shrieked Idaea.

Volf turned to her with a dubious smile. “Sorry. Uh, force of habit from my work, you see...” Dahlia could but force a smile of her own. Volf immediately apologized, saying that he would pay for the damages incurred. Idaea declined the offer and explained that, fortunately, they had someone who could mend it with magic.

With apologies out of the way, the four of them decided to cut their losses and move on from the room. Dahlia felt a pair of eyes on her as she was about to step out of the room. She turned around to see the black slime pressed flat against the glass, but decided to ignore it and continued out into the hallway. The fact that this black slime, one that she had never met prior to today, bore animosity towards her had cemented in her mind the notion that *all* slimes *collectively* bore a grudge against her.

Idaea led the visitors to one final room, the door of which had her name

inscribed on it. Despite not being a particularly spacious room, it contained a few smaller tanks, and each held a mixed pair of slimes. “Here, I’m conducting research on hybrid slimes.”

That had Dahlia scratching her head. “Like crossbreeding? My understanding is that slimes split and duplicate. Is that not the case?”

“That is correct. However, a hypothesis of mine is that this may be one way that monster variants are produced, hence the different slime types in each enclosure,” the researcher said.

Dahlia had always assumed mutations were caused by environmental factors, so this was a fresh idea. The proof of Idaea’s hypothesis might lie in the unique traits of the mutant slimes. “Um, Ms. Idaea, I can’t help but notice that the blue slime is attacking the red one...”

“Yes, they play together like that, and it never escalates much further. The red slime sometimes chases the blue slime around too.” It was just a bit of roughhousing, then. Apparently they got along better than appeared to be the case.

“Perhaps for slimes, too, it is true that love surpasses color or that love is war?” Ivano wondered aloud.

Volf looked somewhat troubled by the straightforward comment. “I don’t know about that; you’re making a lot of assumptions.”

“How does this integrate with everything else?” Dahlia asked about a slightly larger but empty vat.

“Oh, that’s not really related to slime breeding... Since this lab is for my use, I’ve placed an enclosure of my own here.”

“Like, a personal one? For you?”

“That’s right. I bought it with my staff discount so I can stay overnight here at the farm. I don’t have to rent a room in the capital, and I even get food delivered here. This way, I can spend my paycheck on more research.” There was no hesitancy behind her proud smile. Idaea seemed like the type to get fixated on one thing and lose track of everything else—not that the pot should call the kettle black.

Dahlia couldn't help being reminded of her father. She was prone to tunnel vision and would even splurge on very expensive materials, but she was hardly at his level. Carlo had often tried his hand with rare materials, such as fairy glass. Though he had worked hard since he was young and earned much money from his craft, there was but little left in his account at his death. He had likely invested all the money into materials. When Dahlia had gone to close her late father's account at the Merchants' Guild, the staff there had been quite concerned for her, but she had felt confident, as she could stand on her own two feet already.

"The slime in this enclosure may be a mutant one," Idaeia said with a smile as she gestured at the smallest tank in the room. Inside was a softball-sized slime the color of graphite.

"What is that? A gray slime?" It wasn't anything Dahlia had seen before.

"That is exactly what I'm calling it. I found it in the enclosure with a yellow and a green slime. I've been told by an adventurer that gray slimes aren't a thing, so I believe that it was born here in the nursery. It hasn't split yet, though."

It seemed that Volf had never heard of a gray slime before either. "A new kind of monster, then?"

"In a sense, yes," agreed Dahlia. Thoughts of man-made magical swords crossed her mind, but she decided to shelve them away.

"I haven't any information about the gray slime's traits yet. It hasn't attacked anyone up to this point, so I don't know what kind of magic it has either. If there were more than one, then I would analyze its composition."

"Analyze it, huh?" As Volf parroted Idaeia's words back, the gray slime trembled—or was it merely a trick of the light?

When the tour finished, Idaeia mentioned she had some documents to offer Dahlia and went alone to retrieve them from her office. Meanwhile, the guests returned to the blue slime room. As Dahlia watched the slimes move around slowly, she contemplated. She had noticed that Idaeia's hands had red splotches all over—burns from the slimes' corrosive fluids. Her laboratory was

undoubtedly small. The vats were properly maintained and her observation notes were thorough. Though Dahlia wasn't sure how well-compensated a chief researcher was, Idaea's expenses, like the enchanted glass, were nothing to sneeze at.

"Ivano," Dahlia said, "I'm hoping to offer some financial support for Ms. Idaea's research or, at the very least, her tanks. We might get some new slimes that could be used for materials too. How about it?"

"If that is what you would like to do, it's fine by me. But instead of taking money out of your own coin purse, why not make it a business expenditure? We might not even have to spend the company's money if we go to Mr. Augusto. Oh, and if I bring it up to Mr. Forto, I could pit them—er, *put* them together, and that may get things rolling quicker. How about I take care of this matter for you, chairwoman?" he asked, looking her way. Ivano's slip of the tongue revealed there was more he had in mind.

"Please, and thank you."

Volf watched their exchange but chose to keep silent.

It didn't take long before Idaea returned to her visitors. "Thank you for your patience. I'm not sure how much this will help you, Ms. Dahlia, but please have them," she said, holding out a heavy bundle of parchment tied with a strip of leather. "These are files on the composition of the slimes here at the nursery. It's with permission from Mr. Tasso of the Adventurers' Guild, of course."

Printed in neat block letters on the top page was a detailed report of each slime's type, weight, condition, and composition. Dahlia was flabbergasted just thinking how long it would take to assess and record each specimen. "Wow, this is amazing! I've never seen such detailed measurements on slimes before. Thank you very much for the valuable data."

"Thank you for the high praise. I know that powdering dried slimes alters their properties somewhat, so I hope this data will still be useful to you." Idaea showed no signs of the backbreaking effort she'd put into her work; all that showed on her face was the pride and delight of a researcher in a job well done.

"No, I'm sure this will be extremely helpful. Though I've been using blue

slimes for my waterproof cloth and green ones for zephyricloth, it's surprising to see how much their stats differ. And who would've thought yellow slimes were so similar to blue slimes? I might just give them a try next time."

"Let me know how it goes! We've also been able to classify powdered slimes into a premium and a regular grade as well."

"And that's based on the concentration of their magical power?"

"That's right. There is a great deal of variation between specimens that could affect the product, such as nutritional intake, physical activity, and behavior." It was no surprise that a researcher at a slime farm had so much insight. Raising a slime well required care, nourishment, and a stress-free environment; Dahlia felt a little guilty that she and Volf had caused them distress earlier. "The problem is with red slimes. There just aren't a whole lot of them, and they're the hardest to process into powder too. The only way to commodify it is to nullify their toxin, then turn it into a dye."

That reminded Dahlia of the first time she and Gabriella went shopping for cosmetics. "But dyes are awesome in their own right too. Lipstick made from red slime is very popular because it has a great feel to it. I even have some on right now!"

"Oh, so that's why the red is so glossy. I'll have to get some for myself!" Neither of them had meant to get so worked up. Idaeia, perhaps realizing that they shouldn't be standing and chatting all day, straightened up. "This may be a little personal, Ms. Dahlia, but I've always loved slimes ever since I was a young child. By the time I got to college, slimes simply weren't a very popular subject and funding became difficult to acquire. Now, though, I'm able to research and raise them, and I'm so very grateful for it. Thank you."

"This was made possible by the members of all the different guilds. Nonetheless, I really appreciate you sharing your research with me, and I'm very happy for you."

"There's still a lot that we don't know about slimes, but once we learn what makes them special, I hope they can be even more useful as crafting material. Then, maybe one day, there will be bigger and better farms and slime products will be indispensable."

“I feel the same way. I think there’s yet more I can do with slimes, and I am excited to experiment with them further. I can’t wait to see the results of your research, Ms. Idaea.”

“You and me both, Ms. Dahlia!” Idaea extended her right hand, and Dahlia didn’t hesitate to give it a firm shake. The two women shared big smiles, infecting both Ivano and Volf in the process. “We’ll be raising green slimes and all sorts of other ones as well once the expansion is complete. When that happens, be sure to come back!”

The slimes behind Idaea looked as though they were trembling harder than ever before.



The sun was low in the sky by the time the party set out on their return trip to the capital. Their carriage stopped at the Merchants’ Guild to drop off Ivano, as he had some business there; then it was straight to the Green Tower for Dahlia and Volf. The idea of going out to eat had occurred to them, but seeing as she still had some leftover estervino from his last visit, Dahlia’s suggestion of fondue met with immediate approval.

After preparing some steamed vegetables, steamed chicken, steamed prawns, and a soft loaf of white bread, the duo brought the food, the drink, and their tin cups to the table. The diminutive silvery vessels invited their owners to take their time sipping the liquor. And enjoying each other’s company was what they had planned to do, seeing as Volf had tomorrow off.

“To the success of the slime farm and to future magical inventions. Cheers.”

“Here’s to the slimes’ controlled growth and to everyone’s safety from black slimes.”

After Volf finished his peculiar toast, the two touched their cups ever so gently. A different but pleasant aroma came from the cheese fondue bubbling on top of the compact magical stove, as it had estervino inside. It proved to be a good addition to the fondue; a taste test demonstrated that its distinct full-bodied flavor was a fantastic match for the veggies and chicken.

“What am I going to do about the next expedition?” Volf agonized. He

simultaneously looked to be very satisfied by the meal yet suddenly troubled by the near future.

“I’m more than happy to listen if you’d like to ask. I mean, no promises that I can help with anything, though.” Was it a problem with equipment? Destination? Monsters? Whatever it was, Dahlia feared she would be powerless to resolve anything, but at least she would be here to listen.

However, as troubled as his golden eyes were, they stared right back at her. “Well, I was originally thinking that I would use white wine for the fondue during the trip, but this opened another door for me...”

“Well, you’d better put on your big boy pants and give that one a long, hard think.” Her sass drove out whatever indecision was lingering in his head, and they continued with their meal. The steamed pumpkin became even sweeter when dunked into the sea of salty cheese. “Mm! Pumpkin really is in season right now.”

“Oh, it sure is.” The plate of golden squash and brown mushrooms screamed midsummer. “The mushrooms kinda remind me of slimes I see on expeditions. Sometimes, they can get real close.”

“They thrive in dark, damp environments too.”

“Speaking of which, even though I’ve never thought about this when I’m out in the field, today’s visit really made me feel sorry for the slimes, getting pulverized into powder like that.”

“I can see that...” She reckoned he was thinking about the adorable, precious itty-bitty ones.

“Do you think it’ll weigh on you to use slime powder from now on, Dahlia?”

“It gives me a slight twinge, but it won’t make it any harder for me,” she said. “Before my entrance exam for magical toolmaking studies, my father very clearly explained that I should treat materials as lives. Well, that and I had an encounter with one.”

“*You* did? You *fought* one?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say I fought it. My father caught some green slimes in the

forest, then he gave me a silver rod. Let's just say it wasn't easy to get to their cores." They were small, but it still had taken a lot of effort to strike the right spot. After she'd killed three of them, her hands had been speckled with painful blisters. "I butchered many of them too, though I hid and cried the first time."

This was the only thing that Carlo had been very stern about. As if they were a family of adventurers, he had made sure Dahlia knew how to dissect slimes, how to remove their organs, and which of those were usable. It occurred to her that the real lessons might have been that monsters were living beings just as much as humans, that harvesting materials was no easy job, and that being a magical toolmaker meant a certain amount of toil.

"Did I bring up something you'd rather not talk about?" Volf asked.

"No. I made the choice to be a toolmaker, and I can't do my job if I feel sorry for every monster. But my father did drive home the point that every piece of material came from a living creature."

"Sounds like he was quite the strict father."

"He was actually quite soft on me when it came to everything else." Ever since a young age, Dahlia had had Carlo to teach her to create tools, surmount trials, and weather errors. He had given her any book or material she asked for. Dahlia chalked it up to the fact that the only family they had was each other. She liked to think that they had gotten along well, and she didn't yearn for the mother she'd never known. "How about you, Volf? Do you ever feel for the monsters?"

Volf did not reply right away, and when he did, he spoke in a low mutter. "The first cull was tough. Soon after I joined the squad, we were sent to deal with goblins that had settled near a village. It was a massacre by any other name."

"But that was something necessary."

"Mm. I guess so. Goblins reproduce quickly, and they might have rebuilt close by. But I wavered when I needed to kill their young."

"You were new to the order, after all."

"Before I could react, a mage on the supporting line blasted them with ice magic. And they didn't die immediately. If only I hadn't hesitated, then they

wouldn't have had to suffer twice." There was no masking the pain in his voice or the scars left on his heart. "Now, I try to go straight for the kill. No more hesitating, no more thinking. Cold-blooded, aren't I?"

"No. Or if you are, then so am I. Imagine the number of slimes and other monsters that have died for my creations. We're hardly different in their eyes."

"That's not true."

"But it is. To them, you're a reaper and I'm a witch playing at necromancy with their corpses."

"A necromancer, huh?"

For whatever reason, that was the only part of her words he repeated, almost as if he were hoping for a follow-up. Dahlia panicked and continued, "It's not so different from what goes onto our dinner plates either. We humans slaughter cows, pigs, and even kraken because of how great they taste."

"True. Today's chicken and prawns taste great. I guess to sin is human."

Dahlia chuckled, not because it was particularly funny, but because it was rather accurate. What else but humans would use various flora, fauna, and monsters for food, then use their remains after their death? Something else popped into her mind. "By the way, does the castle use nightdogs as guard dogs?"

"Yup, they're sent out on nighttime patrols and during moments of heightened security. The castle breeds them for size, though; they're larger than the average nightdog you'd find as a civilian."

"It must be hard to keep them, right?"

"I dunno, but I presume so. They're clever dogs, but they have lots of energy and a big appetite," Volf said.

It sounded to Dahlia as though they didn't need to be taken for walks but for runs, and they were very agile if she remembered correctly. The dog could run laps around the backyard, but surely it'd be bored with the unchanging scenery. It would be no easy task keeping a nightdog without a big plot.

"Are you planning to get one, Dahlia?"

“I’m still thinking about it. See, during Oswald’s lesson on fairy glass, the topic of guard dogs came up and he recommended I get a large black one, and I figured he meant a nightdog.”

“A large black dog.” Volf knitted his brows, perhaps worried about the potential danger.

Dahlia explained, “I don’t need to buy one, he said, but maybe I could borrow one for the night when I enchant with fairy glass. Are there nightdogs for hire, do you know?”

“They’re used to protect coaches, so maybe you can rent one from a remise.”

“Oh, is that right? Maybe I’ll check with them next time.” There was the place where she’d rented a sleipnir carriage before, and maybe nightdogs would be available there as well. Dahlia thought about the pet dog she’d had in her previous life and decided she wanted to try taking the nightdog for a walk if it was well-trained enough.

Volf still looked rather worried, though. “I guess that means working with fairy glass is really dangerous, then?”

“Enchanting with it isn’t, but it can cause the user to hallucinate images of the fairy’s death and induce nightmares too, Oswald said.”

“Did it happen to you when you made my glasses?”

“No, nothing terrible like that. I saw a kinda see-through fairy thing and felt my father’s presence, but that’s it. Afterwards, I had a few drinks with you and slept well.” Oswald had said that the images that fairy glass showed were “typically the departure and death of loved ones,” but Dahlia knew she absolutely didn’t want to watch her father—or the friend before her—die, and she buried the thought.

“I don’t think you’d really need a nightdog. If you’re enchanting with fairy glass, then it’s probably for my glasses, right? Maybe I could keep you company.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. It’ll be good to have you there so I can fit the glasses for you too.”

“I think I’d feel a little better that way as well...”

“In that case, we can do your glasses first, then design a magical sword together after. If my magic runs dry in the afternoon, I’ll probably be very tired and sleep just fine,” Dahlia reasoned. “I’ll make sure to stock up on enough white wine to last us through the night.”

“Once you decide the date, let me bring the drinks!”

Volf had his usual smile as he turned his gaze towards the golden band on Dahlia’s delicate wrist. Inlaid on the inner surface of the bracelet were some of the best defenses that money could buy. Its maker was the owner of the Goddess’s Right Eye—Oswald Zola. His sly, silvery stare was unforgettable and unsettling. Volf narrowed his eyes and concealed his lips with his fingers. “Oh, real fun making fun of me, is it? Damn codger...” His muttering dissipated into the air before it reached Dahlia’s ears.

Having cleaned up after dinner, Volf brought out a large black case and laid it on the table. He had brought it along with him in the carriage but said only that it was a gift, and Dahlia hadn’t inquired any further. “Here, the drink I promised. Well, actually, I’m not sure if it’s *that* good, but I brought it to celebrate.”

“We did make that promise, didn’t we?” Volf had said he’d bring “a real nice bottle” after her camp stove presentation to the castle’s treasury, and that’s what must have been in the wooden case.

“Sure did, and we have so much to celebrate: your successful presentation, the company becoming an official purveyor to the Order of Beast Hunters, and you becoming an advisor. And, uh, it’s been a hundred days since we’ve met.”

“One hundred whole days already...” Even in her two lives combined, no hundred-day period had been so eventful. In fact, now that she thought about it, every day since she separated from her fiancé had been tumultuous. And the past hundred with Volf felt, strangely enough, as though they’d been both very short and very long.

“So, I asked my brother for a recommendation of a sweet liquor and he recommended this. It’s something we make on our estate, but since there isn’t

a lot of it and it doesn't keep well, it's not something we sell." The moment Volf cracked open the lid of the case, the sweet fragrance of flowers filled the room. "‘Scarlatterba’ is what we call it."

Inside the case was what seemed to be a single plant lying on a black cloth. It looked like a scarlet sage enlarged a few dozen times, but it was a glossy white all over—leaves, stems, petals, and all. Rather than a flower, it seemed like a carving of one.

"I've never seen anything like this before," Dahlia said. "Which part of this is the liquor?"

"Pluck it here, like this." Volf began tearing off one of the flowers, and it ripped as loudly as a sheet of paper. It must have taken quite some force to do so too, and Dahlia didn't think she could do it herself. "The nectar inside is the liquor."

He wrung out the torn flower like a towel, and what came out was easily a quarter cup of transparent liquid that formed a strong set of legs. Volf continued the process for three more flowers, and the powerful odor of ethanol commanded the room. There was zero doubt this was alcoholic.

"Black rats guard the plant and attack and feast on small critters that get drawn to the scent of the flower. Larger animals get intoxicated off of the alcohol, then get eaten as well. What's left is but a pile of bones, hence its meaning in the language of flowers: coexistence and mutual prosperity," Volf explained. This scarlatterba had guardians to protect it, but the image was awfully frightful. "I heard that it's given as a gift and drunk between business partners. But I've also heard that in those circles, it may symbolize paring customers down to the bone. A little scary, huh?"

"You can say that again."

"There's more. If you break down the name, it sorta sounds like 'skull' and 'rat'—the pile of bones and the black rats. There's not the slightest hint of romanticism to the name."

"How do you gather the flowers?"

"I heard that we've been growing these since long ago. We don't employ rats,

but we do employ guards to watch over the hothouse.”

“Interesting.” Dahlia had never heard of an alcoholic flower before.

Volf then offered her a word of warning and a small, shallow bowl. “It’s quite potent, so make sure it doesn’t sneak up on you.”

A sweet, floral, and alcoholic nose wafted from the vessel. After touching her bowl to his, Dahlia took a very small sip. “That is very sweet and very good, and the aroma is superb. It somewhat reminds me of orange blossoms.”

“It’s good, but wow, is it sweet...” He grimaced at his drink. To say that it was as sweet as honey and as strong as cask-strength spirits would be no understatement—it wasn’t the easiest thing to have neat. The scarlatterba must have been saccharine to Volf, as someone who enjoyed his dry drinks.

“If it’s too sweet, why don’t I add some sparkling water for you?”

“Oh, please. How about you?”

“I like it as is, though I might chase it with a bit of water.”

“I should mention that it’ll spoil and turn sour tomorrow. Since it’ll only be good today, should I just go ahead and wring it all out?”

“That would be lovely, thank you. I’ll store it in the fridge if we have any left over.” Dahlia reasoned that it would keep for a little longer if it were chilled, although the floral notes might dissipate. Might as well drink it all tonight if they could.

As Volf worked on the flowers, Dahlia poured his liqueur into a fresh glass, then mixed some soda in. She drank from the bowl again, and the aroma of the flower spread through her mouth. The last sip of the scarlatterba clung warmly to the lining of her throat, proving once again that it was a strong drink.

“You’d never expect it to be this strong considering how smooth it is. I think it’s much more palatable cut like this,” Volf said.

“It’s definitely sweet and smooth enough that you forget how much you’ve had already.” Even as she mentioned how dangerous it could be, Volf topped up her bowl. She made sure not to get too tipsy as she once again reminded her taste buds of the liqueur. The stars outside her window looked especially pretty

tonight, she thought as she indulged herself in the third bowl.

“Hey, um, I hate to spring this on you, but my brother mentioned that he’d like to meet you. I mean, seeing how I’ve become a guarantor of the company, he’s probably a little curious about you too.”

“But I’ll only offend him with my lack of noble etiquette, won’t I?”

“Oh, no, you’ll be fine. He suggested that we can all go to my manor for a spot of tea, so it’ll be just the three of us.” Volf scrambled to add, “You’re free to decline if you’re not comfortable with the idea, of course.”

“I would like to thank your brother. He helped us with the camp stove presentation, and you’re always here for me, helping me out as well.”

“I say you’ve got it the other way around.”

“No, no... Doesn’t this back-and-forth seem a little familiar?”

“It kinda does.” They’d argued on and on about the same thing before.

“Hey, Volf? How about we make like the drink and coexist and flourish together?”

“Me and you, huh? That sounds wonderful.”

Dahlia felt warm and fluttery; it was only on rare occasions that she’d let alcohol get to her like this. She stretched her arm as far as she could, bumping against his fingers as she touched her bowl to his glass. The satisfying ring put a smile on her face. “May we thrive together forever.”

Volf, too, was someone who could handle his liquor, but perhaps it had likewise gotten to him—her close inspection of his face showed that his cheeks were ever so slightly tinged with a blush. “To everlasting prosperity for the two of us...” he said to the bottom of his glass.



Married Men and Scorpio

The sun was at the horizon when Jean left the Adventurers' Guild for the carriage stop, earlier in the day than when he usually ended work. Waiting for him was a coach and a woman—Ermelinda, Oswald's third wife. Oswald must have been up to something, sending his wife to pick up a male guest who was himself married. After they greeted each other, the tall raven-haired beauty sat across from him in the carriage. Her eyes, green like verdure, were fixed on him, and were oddly familiar.

"Shall we break the silence and make some conversation, Instructor Jean?"

Her coy smile struck him dumb for a moment. "Wait. Don't tell me you're the Meat Grinder."

"How flattering that you still remember me, but how cruel of you to remember only the mean nickname they called me when I was still a novice. I had cooler ones too, like 'Bladefury' or 'Black Gale,' you know?"

"Forgive me. I was shocked to find out that you're Mrs. Zola now. Last I heard, you'd gone back to your village."

It had been more than a decade since Jean was an instructor for new adventurers. His role had been to take those who had just registered with the guild on a four-day field course, training them in how to traverse plains and forests, educating them about monsters and whatever other aspects the greenhorns wanted help with.

The official reason that Jean had been put into the position was because of a lack of field instructors, but the truth was that he'd struggled under the mountain of paperwork every day—and, more likely than not, it had also been a favor from then-member of human resources Augusto.

The newbies who were placed under Jean's care were unbelievably talented yet incredibly lacking in technique. Never had there been people who could ruin

monster parts and materials quite like those two. One of them was a young man with hair the color of the fire he wielded. The other was a raven-haired young woman with body-strengthening magic and a sword in each hand. Jean was constantly yelling at them to stop burning everything to a crisp and to stop slicing and dicing everything to mincemeat.

After they had completed their training, the two went on to become a top adventuring duo and sprinted to achieve elite classification. Still, their forte wasn't hunting for materials so much as exterminating monsters; they would reduce material worth a gold to a copper, hence the guild's materials department calling them "Charbroiler" and "Meat Grinder" behind their backs.

The duo had quit adventuring a few years back, and Jean had never seen them since. More accurately, he had seen Ermelinda around in the guildhall, though he never guessed that she was the same person as Mel the Meat Grinder.

"I didn't feel right staying in that village without him. It was then that my husband found me and took me in. Oh, and you needn't speak so formally with me, instructor. Please feel free to lean back in the coach as well," Ermelinda replied.

"Thanks, I'll take you up on that offer," said Jean. "You've become so beautiful that I couldn't recognize you at all, not to mention your name..."

"Never would I expect you to flatter me so, but thank you. Before I was married off, I was adopted into a relative's family. They were the ones who named me Ermelinda, from Mel." Her short hair had turned long and shiny, her dark suntanned skin to fine porcelain, and her easy-to-move-around-in light armor to a fine black silk dress. However, the biggest transformation of all was from a refreshing breeze to a beguiling madam.

"I'm glad that you're still kick—er, sorry." For someone who knew why she had quit adventuring, that was a very tactless comment.

"Thank you. And please don't bother; I'm more than fine now. Though I wasn't able to prevent him from going berserk, I was able to care for him in his last moments. Plus, I am happily married now as well." She didn't waver; her response was bright and dazzling.

“I see.” Jean recalled that small-framed, fiery-haired young man. Bothered about being a few centimeters shorter than Mel, many a time he had asked how he could grow big and tall like Jean. The youth had had an outstanding command of advanced fire magic and would never take the spellcasting gloves off his hands during training, claiming that an adventurer must always be prepared. If only Jean had realized back then. The youth, in a desire to enhance his magic, had hidden his blight. During a battle—his last—against a powerful monster, the fire within had consumed him. Mel, who had suffered terrible burns too, had retired from adventuring and moved back to her hometown.

Crushing a monster’s magical core sometimes released a powerful burst of magic (some called it the monster’s wrath unleashed or a form of divine protection), causing what was called a blight. Though the fine details were hazy at best, it generally endowed the victim with great physical and magical power. However, it came at a price—it transformed the blighted partly into the slain monster, as though it had possessed them. It also weakened their fine control of magic, overfilling them and therefore causing damage to the body, altering the sense of smell and temperature, amongst other ill effects. It was often hard for the blighted to continue living as humans.

In extreme cases, one would lose control of one’s blight and become fully possessed, turning into a hunted monster. A particularly powerful blight could be financially costly to dispel, in which case the priests would impose a payment plan or indentured servitude in exchange for their services. It was extremely rare for a blight to get to that stage, and the average person had no knowledge of such things.

Ermelinda’s calm, gentle voice broke the silence. “You needn’t feel responsible for what happened to him, instructor.” She looked up at him. There was the slightest hint of trouble in her grassland green eyes; Jean realized he must’ve looked remorseful.

“It’s not that I feel responsible. I was merely reminiscing about the past, how appraisal—and myself as well—would deplore the way that monster parts came chopped up or charred black.”

“I can only apologize, but for a small adventuring party, the priority was always defeating the target as quickly as possible. Wouldn’t you happen to have

any fonder or happier memories?” she said with a pained smile.

Their newbie training had been at the tail end of summer—the season they were now once again approaching rapidly. The start of the irksome duo’s career had been marked by an episode in which Jean chastised them in front of the guild hall. “I remember that during our session he’d carbonized the rarebit. And remember that time that I went through the trouble of bleeding the boar we hunted? He tried roasting the whole damn thing, only for it to be black on the outside but raw on the inside, so he threw it into a cauldron of wine to boil it up. Or when I’d ask him to boil some water and he’d ruin the pot by turning it black too.”

“I remember that. If it weren’t for adventuring with him, I wouldn’t be nearly as good as I am with a campfire.”

“Hey, it was a matter of life or death for you,” Jean joked. “Oh, there was also that party we had after your training where he mixed his booze with milk so he’d grow taller. Of course, his concoction went out of him as quickly as it went in...”

“I haven’t heard that one before.” Ermelinda laughed out loud, but Jean wasn’t sure whether it was supposed to sound mirthful. Even her laugh was different now. What used to be loud cackles that would show everyone the inside of her mouth were now polite giggles covered by her fair fingers and pink nails. Still, even with this trip down memory lane, Jean could not conjure up the smile of the man who had always been by her side. She said, “How nostalgic. It’s been too long since I’ve talked about that person at all.”

“*That*—no, you’re right. Same goes for me.” Did she omit his name out of lingering feelings for him? Or was it out of consideration for Oswald? Jean dared not assume, but what he did know was that he, too, had a hard time bringing up the man’s name.

Though he chose to cut himself off, Ermelinda mistook it for an inquisitive silence. “Oh, yes, about my phrasing—I cannot utter his name anymore, as it was sealed with a contract at the temple, you see.”

“But—” Jean hesitated again, hoping to find the right words this time. “Isn’t that a little selfish of Chairman Zola?” As soon as those words left his mouth, it

was as though a streak of ice had pierced his forehead. His body tensed up; he had not found the right words.

Ermelinda took a breath before reapplying a smile to her face, and her jolt of magic dissipated. “It appears that I have caused a misunderstanding. It was I who requested the contract.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I’m fine now, but I would have nightmares and wake up crying and screaming another man’s name. You can see how *that* would also be quite the nightmare.”

Jean had no words left.



The sight of Oswald’s home put Jean in awe. Though it was mostly hidden from view by the tall ashen half wall, the manor was perspicuously beyond a baron’s status—the size of the plot and the fine construction was fit for a viscount or even an earl. As head of materials, Jean made consultation visits and deliveries to many nobles’ homes; whether he liked it or not, he had developed a discerning eye. He followed Ermelinda’s lead deep into the back of the house to a parlor. It was small—perhaps intended for no more than a few guests—but cozy. The warm ivory and dark browns were inviting and calming.

Waiting at the table was Oswald. “Welcome, Mr. Tasso. Please excuse my boldness right out of the gate, but may I address you as Mr. Jean for today?”

“Of course. Thank you very much for your generous invitation, Chairman Zola.”

“Please, call me by my given name as well. I would love for you to feel relaxed here.” Perhaps because he was in the comfort of his own home, the smile on Oswald’s face was gentler than ever.

Jean took a seat across from him, and shortly, the maids brought out their food and drinks. It wasn’t the style typical of the nobility, with courses served one at a time; rather, everything was spread out on the table.

“I hope you can forgive the informality of all this; I didn’t want our conversation to be interrupted by servants passing in and out. Oh, and I should

say, tonight's menu was caringly picked out by Mel."

She explained, "To pair with your conversations about adventuring, the entrées tonight are pheasant steak and giant boar stew with red wine. Served alongside are winter wheat bread with chèvre, a salad of wild greens, and soup with herbs."

"I hope it's not disrespectful to say so, but it feels just like old times—they look absolutely delicious." Jean prayed that his smile would conceal the less-than-appetizing memories in his head. When he had been training Mel, he'd been too lenient on the newbies' pheasant plucking, and the resulting meat was thoroughly unpleasant. The boar, as he'd mentioned earlier in the coach, had been charred black, and the youth's idea of saving it had been to throw the thing in a pot of red wine; the end result was a special kind of gaminess.

"I shall be taking my leave before you gentlemen drag me into your scorpio tasting."

"Very well. I hope you have a pleasant evening."

"Thank you, and please enjoy your meal, Mr. Tasso," she said as she and the maids left the room.

"My wives are having one of them girls' nights tonight; they stocked up on cakes and desserts this afternoon," said Oswald. "Even though I'm sure I heard them worry about their weight a few days ago."

"Hah. That's, erm, better left unmentioned to them." But it also brought up memories of his own wife. Not that it'd be a concern for much longer, he reminded himself.

"Oh, I made sure to make no mention. To insinuate a correlation between a lady's weight and her sweets is a fool's errand."

The two men shared a hearty chuckle, and each put his glass of dark ale to the other's. After his host urged him to dig in, Jean did so and found every single thing on the table to be exquisite. The flavor of the pheasant was much more robust than that of chicken, yet it hadn't any unpleasant odors as game birds tended to have. The fat had been nicely rendered, preventing the meat from being too cloying and allowing the skin to crisp up. As for the giant boar, it was

apparent from the first bite that it had been stewed in fine wine. The fattiness of the cut not only made it sweet and tender, but each piece almost melted in the mouth. It would have been a crime to devour the dish without savoring its richness, although it tempted the eater to do so.

Between bites of food, Jean depleted the ale in his glass. Oswald had left a handful of bottles within reach—something that would have been unthinkable improper to any other noble, but something for which Jean was very grateful. As the alcohol began to course through his body, the stories of monsters and his adventuring past flowed into his head. “Are there any monsters you are particularly interested in, Lord Oswald?”

“Oh, yes, I would love to hear how kraken are defeated and their parts harvested. What are they like in person?”

“Hm, let’s see. Not only are they gigantic creatures, finding good footing is a fight of its own. Many excursions will have mages aboard the ship to temporarily freeze the surface of the ocean so that fighters with cleated boots can get up close to the beast.”

“Interesting. What weapons does one use on such a hunt?”

“Personally, I borrowed a greatsword from the fleet captain to chop up the monster. As it was a magical sword, the blade of wind that it produced had immense reach, even though it was physically only a smidgen shorter than me.”

“Incredible. Was the blade of wind as long as this dining table?”

“Even longer; it could reach from one end of this room to the other. The sword itself wasn’t very heavy, but it was unwieldy—I carelessly clipped the ship on multiple occasions.” When Jean had yet to get used to the weapon, he had chopped down the ship’s mast and cleaved a dinghy in two and sunk it, but he decided to keep that to himself.

“And the mages, did they fight the kraken as well?”

“Not often when I went, as krakens are much more valuable as materials when cut into halves or quarters. If the objective of an expedition were to slay the beast, they would likely employ elite mages wielding ice or wind magic; fire would consume the parts and water would be ineffective.”

“I see, I see. A burnt kraken would indeed be a hassle for me too.” For a businessman and a magical toolmaker, Oswald seemed awfully engaged in the story, listening intently and following up with meaningful questions too. Most of all, there was no faking the way his eyes gleamed.

Perhaps it had been too long since Jean had so enjoyed a drink and a meal, or perhaps it was because he had such a good audience, but he was afraid he had babbled. “Apologies for going on and on, Mr. Oswald.”

“Please don’t be. I love hearing tales from a seasoned adventurer such as yourself. As a child, I yearned to be one myself for the longest time.”

“Is that right? And you didn’t choose to be a mage instead of a magical toolmaker?”

“No, I have no aptitude for adventuring. When we did middle-distance running in elementary school, I would get lapped by the other boys.”

“In middle-distance running, you say?” Jean dug through his memories of elementary school. That had been, what, two laps or three at the most around a big field? Not many kids had gotten lapped, as far as he remembered. He wondered if Oswald had been frail as a child.

“I was round and plump back then; my only competition would’ve been tonight’s giant boar.”

Jean probably shouldn’t have done so, but he studied Oswald. His dark gray hair was swept back and his silver eyes were framed by a pair of glasses with rims of the same color. There was no ignoring the fact that he was a little past his prime, but his well-groomed looks said that he was still going strong. His barony, extensive business operations, and fame as a magical toolmaker—all personal achievements—made him very popular among the ladies. Some men even called him a “sly silver fox” behind his back, and, to be perfectly honest, Jean, too, had been envious of him before.

“I would love to continue this conversation into the night, Mr. Jean, but are you fine for time? I wouldn’t want to have the missus stay up worrying.”

“There’s no need to worry about that; I live alone.” He hesitated for a moment too long, and he was met with Oswald’s steely gaze.

“Is that right? Starting anew, so to speak?”

“You could put it like that. She’s gone back to her parents’, and I’m sure talk of divorce will come sooner or later.”

“Shall we move to the study? We wouldn’t want to keep the bottles of red, white, and black scorpio waiting.”

With a not-so-genuine smile, Jean accepted his invitation.

It was a study in name only; in truth, it was more like a little library with books upon books squeezed together on shelves, rows of black leather briefcases, and one ridiculously oversized ebony desk—Jean figured even a heavysset man like himself had enough room to roll around on the desktop.

He took a seat inside, and before long, Oswald produced a selection of glass bottles from a shelf. The wide-mouthed bottles were all filled with scorpio—a clear spirit with a red, white, or black scorpion waiting at the bottom.

“Some ice or water for you?” Oswald asked.

“No, thank you, I’ll have it neat.”

Oswald popped the stopper out of one of the bottles, releasing its strong, unique aroma. He poured a finger or two of the liquor into a pair of rocks glasses and set one in front of Jean. The face had an intricate etching of a scorpion; Oswald must’ve really loved his scorpio. After they clinked glasses and drank, Jean was reminded that it was indeed a stiff drink. It inundated his throat and the fragrance rushed through his nose, revealing no foul odors, contrary to its looks.

“Tonight, we drink scorpio,” said Oswald. “I offer my ear and experience should you let the alcohol aid you in opening up.”

“I’m not sure if it’d be opening up so much as just bellyaching.”

“Do you have anyone to listen? Bottling it up will quickly destroy you from the inside out, you know.”

Jean could but don a humorless smile when Oswald looked his way. It was almost as if Oswald could read minds. Chalk it up to the strong liquor, but Jean

was in a chatting mood tonight. “Thank you for indulging in my bit of worthless sniveling, then. Where do I begin? Work never ceases to be busy, I can never afford to take a day off, and I get home late every night, so my wife went back to her parents’. It’s not her first time doing so, but this time, I don’t think she’s coming back.”

“I see. Were there other issues between you two?”

“Not especially. I mean, work is work, and I wanted her to live comfortably...”

“May I speak candidly?”

“Please.”

“Maintaining a minimum lifestyle is the responsibility of a married couple, no? Have you expressed to your wife that the reason why you spend so little time at home is because you want to afford her a higher quality of life? Is it not presumptuous to believe you can get the point across without voicing it?” Oswald certainly didn’t mince his words.

Jean had never talked to his wife about it before because he hadn’t believed he needed to; his hard work would get the point across, he’d thought—erroneously, it seemed. His father had taught him that a man spoke with his actions and that all a man needed to do was devote himself to his work. His mother had always waited with a smile for her husband to return home from the dangerous job that he did to support the family. That was how Jean had been raised, and that was what he regarded as the natural order of things. “My father, he used to say that a man speaks through his back—that is, with his actions...”

“Actions speak, but only if your audience is listening. There is, after all, no mouth on one’s back. Does your wife understand why you express yourself with few words?”

Jean, indignant at Oswald’s frankness, fired back, “I mean, I don’t have the time for more words. We commoners just have to slave away like this, see. For someone who is so capable at everything under the sun, how could you possibly understand why my wife would just leave me, Mr. Oswald?” He knew his drunkenness couldn’t excuse his abrasive words and that there might be no mending things afterwards.

But Oswald, showing nary a trace of anger, simply closed his eyes and downed the rest of his scorpio. He let out a sigh and looked straight at Jean. “I was in the same boat as you.”

“Huh?”

“A long time ago, my first wife—my ex-wife, I should say, eloped with my apprentice and store manager. Of course, they left with all of my money and property as well. At that point, all I could think about was how to put an end to my wretched life.”

“That happened to *you*?” It certainly didn’t sound like a joke, but Jean couldn’t help but wonder if *that* Oswald was the same person now sitting before him.

“It certainly was not a story I made up to entertain you,” he said with a smile. “Say, Mr. Jean, do you know why Miss Dahlia introduced the two of us?”

“She said so we could have scorpio together, but I, um, doubt that’s the answer.”

“As do I. In any case, I have told you nothing but the truth. That was a low point in my life—I would even go so far as to say, that was nearly the end of my life. It was Miss Dahlia’s father, Carlo, who saved me.”

“Her father, you say?”

“As he was older than me, he had looked out for me ever since we met in college. That day, he dragged me around from food stall to food stall and we drowned ourselves in liquor from day to night,” Oswald said, though Jean found it difficult to imagine he’d be the type. “Carlo never once lectured me, but instead recommended that I find a new lady. Well, a lot happened between then and now, but I am still here kicking.”

“Mr. Carlo...” Jean placed his fingers on his chin as he recalled the man with sandy hair. Though he had never heard about Carlo’s wife before—not even through the grapevine—the man must’ve been single, judging by his recommendation of “a new lady.”

Oswald smiled, sensing his curiosity. “Carlo had a beloved young lady by his side for the longest time. She was like a red blossom in the summer.”

“Hm, I see.” He thought of Carlo, then of Dahlia, and that made a lot of sense to him. Jean realized that Carlo hadn’t recommended that Oswald take a new lover, but it was an awfully roundabout way to recommend that he make a new loving family.

“Besides, I should add that you do not have it nearly as bad as I did. The missus merely went back to her parents’ home, isn’t that right?”

“I suppose so...” Oswald was suddenly probing Jean for an answer, and Jean found it hard to refute the implication. If he had been in Oswald’s shoes, Jean would probably have dropped everything, chased after his wife and subordinate, and made an even bigger mess out of everything.

“Now, Mr. Jean, if you think you can change yourself, would you want your wife to come back home to you? Or will you give up on it all and resign yourself to the idea that nothing will ever change?”

“I want to be better. I want her to come home. But time and time again, I’ve made things worse. I sent her a letter, but...”

“A letter? Have you no spine, man? Why not simply go to her and tell her your feelings? You *do* understand where you went wrong, yes?”

“Going to her parents’ to apologize? But my pride as a man—”

“You can take that kind of pride and feed it to slimes, because that is all it is worth.” Oswald chewed him out as he emptied the spirits into their glasses. Neither man cared about the drips and splashes on the desk. The red scorpion was dumped out onto a plate on top of the white scorpion already lying there.

“What...what do I say?” mumbled Jean.

“I recommend that you first apologize. Tell her that you want to be better and how exactly you are going to improve yourself. If it is too difficult to express yourself in words, then write it down in a list. Do avoid saying that you will ‘do whatever you can’ or ‘be more careful from now on’; those are words that carry little weight and would simply make the situation worse. And needless to say, do not make promises you cannot uphold.”

“Right...” It was too much to fit into his head. Jean knocked back some of the scorio and gave in to the fire traveling down his esophagus.

Both their glasses were empty again, so Oswald filled them from a new bottle. This time, the scorpion was as black as coal. “And what has your wife said thus far? Any expectations or desires?”

“She has told me to stop working myself to the bone, to come home earlier, to find a new job. That her family will even support us financially, that they’ll find me a new line of work. Just that I must spend more time at home.”

“You have yourself a good wife.”

“I even snapped at her for suggesting that I take money from her family or that they’ll get me a job. She was too good for me.”

“Why is that in the past tense, you dolt? A former elite adventurer like you ought not to be a coward. Tomorrow, you will take a leave of absence and go to her immediately.” Oswald fumed. “Oh, give me strength... It boils my blood to see you just like me back then.”

“Lord Oswald?” His sudden biting remarks left Jean with little response but Oswald’s name.

“When I was a young man, I had my nose to the grindstone too, thinking it was good that I could provide my wife with a comfortable life. I let her make all the clothes she wanted, go to all the operas and plays that she wanted, and be with her friends whenever she wanted. I bought her accessories from a popular atelier for her birthdays, got the florists to deliver her flowers for our anniversaries, and I even made sure to lavish the in-laws. People around me said I was a good husband to her, and, foolishly enough, I let myself think it too.”

“But you did all that because you loved your wife. So, why?”

“She did not see it that way. Not one bit.” Oswald’s lips curved upward, but he hardly seemed happy. “After my wife left, I talked with the maids. She did not like accessories that matched the color of her eyes, she complained that the flowers were picked by the florist and not by her husband, and she couldn’t stand how her parents kept demanding more money. It was then that she began to worry for my health because I was working too hard, and so she turned to my apprentice.”

“That was still no reason to betray you...” The words trickled from Jean’s mouth before he could stop them. Today, Oswald had three young women to call wives, his barony, and a successful business. Jean hoped that Oswald didn’t blame himself for the loss of his first wife and apprentice.

“You are an honest man, Mr. Jean. But I gave up. I didn’t understand her, and neither did she understand me. We didn’t try to understand each other. By the time I had realized that, it was all too late. That is all.” His story ended there, and he turned to the plate of scorpions. Oswald stuck them with skewers, handed one to his guest, and brought out a compact magical stove. After the two men finished roasting their snacks in silence, they plucked off the legs and stingers, sprinkled on some salt and pepper, and crunched down on the torsos. After a chase of liquor, all that was left in their mouths was a savory, smoky flavor.

Wanting to bring some positivity to their conversation, Jean found that the stove conjured up thoughts of the red-haired woman who had made tonight possible. She and Oswald seemed rather close with each other, what with her knowing his past already, and Jean couldn’t help but wonder. “I hope you will blame the alcohol for my prying, but Lord Oswald, do you intend to take Miss Dahlia as your fourth wife?”

“I do not; she is Carlo’s daughter, a skilled magical toolmaker in her own right, and we are in the same business circle is all. Does it seem as though I am trying to woo her?”

“No, it’s just that—erm, well, you see, there is a rumor circulating in the Adventurers’ that you have a fondness for women with green eyes.”

“That much is true.”

“Oh, so it is? Did your first love have green eyes as well?” Alcohol was indeed a great social lubricant, and Jean was feeling plenty drunk already.

The middle-aged man pulled a weird shape with his mouth—almost like a smile—and stared into the darkness outside of the window. “My first love was a woman with tawny eyes. Not only did she toy with my feelings, she then dumped me in a spectacular fashion. I have become rather averse to women with tawny eyes ever since.”

“I see...”

“The next lady I saw had purple eyes, but our relationship was fleeting, as she passed away before her time. That was terribly painful. The one after that had dark brown eyes. It turned out she had pulled the wool over my eyes, and that left a bit of a sting too. Youth and desperation go hand in hand, and so I gained a bit of a reputation as a philanderer.” That was apparently another rumor with a kernel of truth. Jean almost felt envious, but knew better than to wish for the same thing after hearing the glum tone in Oswald’s voice. “My relatives couldn’t bear to watch me continue down that path, and after I, too, had a change of heart, they set me up with a nice woman, who, in time, I pledged my life to. That woman was none other than my ex-wife. She had blue eyes, and after she left me, that color became a deal-breaker for me as well. So, the only color of eyes that soothes my soul is green; call it the process of elimination, if you will.”

“Au...” Jean found that only a pathetic sound had escaped his mouth. He gave up the idea of salvaging the utterance and instead washed away the vestiges of the missing words with a drink of scorpio.

“I may have loved many times, but so too have I cried much.”

“Hey, just your numbers alone are enough to make me envy you.”

“Oh? I wouldn’t have expected an elite adventurer like you to say that.”

“My ex-wife and I were together ever since we were novices,” explained Jean. “Then one day, I let my gaze wander for one minute and next thing I know, she’d put a knife in me.” His ex-wife had physically stopped him from pursuing a youthful indiscretion, and the results had left the priests at the temple agape. It was funny now, in retrospect, but had been less so at the time.

“She stabbed you?! And why did you and your passionate ex-wife separate?”

“After we got married, I was sent out for work for long periods at a time. I thought I could afford her safety and security, but, um, she said it was too painful to spend her days alone longing for me.”

“Had you not chosen to work together? Or did you ask her to stay at home?”

“I wanted her to be safe and sound at home. And men can’t be begging women like that.”

“Oho. A man’s pride is worth the regret and heartache that follows, is it?”

“I...” Jean didn’t get to finish that thought—he knew he couldn’t anyway. Instead, his host offered him a spirits-soaked bug toasted on a stick, the unique flavor of which reminded him of his adventures in the desert. He and his fellow adventurers would drink hard liquor like scorpio as freely as water, and by his side would be his then-lover. The bitter coldness of the desert night had been so very warm. “I must confess that I do regret how things played out and that I do feel guilty about it all. Much like now, I dedicated all my efforts to my work so that I could provide her with a good life. I thought it was my duty as a husband and that it would bring her happiness.”

“We fail to say what we think, to discuss problems in plain language, and pick our words poorly—even if our loved ones are by our sides, they still cannot read our minds. Know that I do my utmost so that my wives will not leave me.” Oswald, although not quite what Jean had expected, now seemed a much better man than the silver fox Jean had imagined.

“You’re full of surprises, Mr. Oswald. I didn’t expect to be able to speak to you like this.”

“I should apologize for disappointing you, but now you know I am but a yellowbelly.”

“Not disappointing, not at all. And I’d say you’re the opposite of that. You’re always so calm and collected, so confident.”

“If I were such a confident man, I wouldn’t need medicine for my stomach. It is naught but a guise.”

“A guise?”

“Fake it till you make it, as they say. Do it for ten years, and it will come to you too. One’s own guise is important, you see. My hairstyle and suit introduces me to the world. Oh, and don’t forget the business smile either; all you need to do is spend ten hours practicing it in front of the mirror.”

“I’ve never even thought about that...”

Afterwards, the two had themselves a blast talking about work. Jean couldn’t have found a better conversation partner.

“Oh, where did the time go?” The world outside the window had become bright all of a sudden, and Jean caught a glimpse of dawn breaking. Six bottles, each of them dry, lay on the desk. The night of drinking had left their throats equally dry; their voices were raspy.

“Time truly disappeared along with the good drink. I would love to do this again another time—and I don’t say that just to be polite.”

“I would love to as well. Listen, I, uh, I was wondering, would it be all right if I addressed you as ‘Professor Oswald?’”

Jean’s words may have come from drunkenness, but Oswald broke into a smile. “Certainly. You know, you are the second person to do so; the first is Miss Dahlia.”

“I’d be happy if you would drop formalities and call me by just my first name too. Do you teach Miss Dahlia in some way?”

“I have been instructing her on castle etiquette and the ways of running a company, and since we are both in the same trade, I have even learned a few things from her.”

“Do you think she foresaw this would happen? Is that why she introduced the two of us?”

“I don’t think that is it. Jean, I believe she was simply worried about you. Her kindness is marked by unusual fervor, you see.”

“Ah, I perfectly understand what you mean. Her kindness is like stepping barefoot on a fire crystal.” Jean chuckled to himself. He relayed the fire crystal incident involving himself and Dahlia, at which Oswald looked embarrassed for her. “It was then that I realized Mr. Carlo had the same tendencies.”

“Did he, now?”

Jean explained, “Quite a long time ago, there was this kerfuffle in the front of the guildhall—a group of adventurers quarreling amongst themselves about their pay. When I went to mediate, there Mr. Carlo was handing a silver piece to the adventurer who received the smaller cut. He said, ‘There was a time in the

past when I found myself in a bind and my friend gave me a silver piece. Today, I am paying it forward to Ms. Cutie here.’ It wasn’t until he said that that I realized the adventurer was a woman. Afterwards, one of the guild clerks asked how Mr. Carlo knew, and he replied, ‘What? By her legs, obviously.’ Confused the hell out of everyone.”

“That certainly sounds like Carlo...”

But what still flabbergasted Jean was the turn of events that had followed. “I hate to be crass, but the next time she came by the guild, she had really turned into a true beauty. I don’t know what happened afterwards, however.”

“Such a deceitful man, that Carlo...” It must’ve been memories of his good friend that put such a tender smile on Oswald’s face. “Miss Dahlia truly takes after her father. She’s very kind and caring, and sometimes even a bit dangerously unpredictable.”

“No doubt. And I am very grateful that she introduced us.” If it weren’t for Oswald, Jean wouldn’t be going to his wife later today. He’d still be clinging on to his toxic masculine pride, and he would likely have had to grieve alone when they eventually separated. For this chance of winning his wife back, Jean knew he owed Dahlia. He didn’t know how he could or should, but he promised himself he would someday return the favor. But before that, there was something more urgent. “I will go to my in-laws’ place today. I will think about how I must conduct myself from now on and what I can do, then write it down and propose it to my wife. Of course, I will not make any promises I cannot keep. However it plays out, I plan to report to you, professor, and Miss Dahlia as well. And if it doesn’t work out, well, I hope I can find a drinking partner in you when I return.”

Oswald gave him an earnest nod. “Very well. From the bottom of my heart, I pray for your success. One word of warning, however: I advise you not to talk at length about Miss Dahlia or to praise her excessively either, for you may cause unwanted misunderstandings and jealousy.”

“Surely not. There are far too many years between Miss Dahlia and myself, and my wife isn’t one to get jealous like that,” Jean said, laughing to himself at the thought.

However, the professor's look burned him like frost. "There is still time before the sun rises, so Jean, allow me to provide a crash course on 'the heart of the wife.'"

A Mountain of Letters and the Employee

“What’s, uh, what’s with all the letters...?” Inside the room that the Rossetti Trading Company rented for their office space within the Merchants’ Guildhall, Dahlia’s desk was buried under three different-sized piles of letters. The total count had to be in the triple digits.

Standing at the other end of the desk, Ivano indicated the tallest bundle. “The biggest stack here are the congratulations and the hopefuls for business in the future.”

“Congratulations, as in for becoming purveyors to the Beast Hunters?”

“There is that, but it’s more to congratulate you on your nomination as consultant to the Order of the Beast Hunters—that is more or less a confirmation of your barony.”

“Oh. Right.” With the excitement of visiting the slime farm and going out with Volf, she had almost forgotten for a moment about the daunting prospect that she would likely become a baroness next year.

“I will reply to those with conventional thank-you letters. The second largest stack here,” Ivano said, gesturing, “these are the cold calls and interview applicants. Most of them will get shut down with a ‘too busy with the zephyricloth’ response. The rest are from nobles, so I will off-load those to Mr. Forto.”

As Dahlia turned her eyes to the centermost and final stack of letters, she worried whether their tiny company of two merited the attention of Viscount Luini, master of the Tailors’ Guild.

“These are the invitations to dinners and tea parties—the blind dates, if you will.”

“Dates? With *me*?”

“They certainly don’t have my name on the front. See, the end of your engagement just crossed the three-month mark, and so the letters are all

flooding in at once. Let me just say that this is a fraction of what you would receive if not for Captain Grato.”

“You’re saying this is a reduced number?”

“Yes, ma’am. Firstly, there aren’t many from married suitors; few would choose to take a self-made baroness as a second wife. Secondly, those without businesses or titles of their own know that they would be lying to themselves if they thought they had a chance.”

“Lying to themselves...” There were apparently standards for marriage eligibility, but they were completely foreign to Dahlia. But that phrase, the “lying” part—Dahlia shuddered. It reminded her too much of how Gildo had referred to her as a *lion*, and she shook it out of her head.

“There are eleven letters from senders ranging in importance from large trading families to viscounties. What shall we do with them?”

Firm in her response, Dahlia said, “I have no intentions of even entertaining those offers.”

“Okay, I shall reject them on your behalf. With Mr. Carlo’s name, we can refuse those from nobles whose ranks are equal to or less than his own. However, that leaves us with three letters from viscounts. It is inadvisable to cause friction with them. Shall I turn them down in Mr. Leone’s name?”

“Yes, please. Um, actually, have you asked Mr. Leone about that already?”

“Oh, I failed to mention that he has already given us permission to do so if any bothersome marriage proposals come your way. Our stock response is by the book and Madam Gabriella has made his seal available to you.”

Dahlia was indeed very grateful, although she really questioned whether it was all right for her to have the seal. But there seemed to be a bigger problem at hand—Ivano knitted his brow as he pressed a finger against his temple.

“And to think this is just the beginning... Once you become a baroness, you can’t just flatly refuse the other aristocrats like this anymore... Oh, you’ve got to find yourself a noble guardian soon...”

“That’s not a bad idea, I suppose.” A noble guardian was exactly the two parts

of the phrase combined—a noble who looked out for someone of lower rank or with no title at all. It wasn't so much that they directed their ward; the role was more like that of a guarantor—to guarantee a ward's abilities and perhaps provide help when needed. Dahlia had had her father, who had been a baron, but she had no other relatives in the aristocracy. Her mother's side of the family were total strangers to her, so even if they ever came into contact again, Dahlia wouldn't want to ask them for that favor.

“Right. Actually, you have also received a letter from someone offering to be your noble guardian.”

“Is it Mr. Leone?”

Leone had offered his help, so it wouldn't have surprised Dahlia if he had offered to do this as well, but Ivano shook his head. “It was sent by Head Treasurer Lord Gildovan Diels. Can't get much better than a marquis.”

Dahlia's brain refused to comprehend the words he'd just uttered. Coming from Gildovan of Marquisate Diels, it was certainly a shock. On the one hand, all's well that ends well, right? He had sent a letter of apology, flowers, and sweets, and she had even sent him a thank-you note in return. On the other hand, Dahlia simply could not think of a good reason why he would offer to act as her guardian. “Say what?”

“It was addressed to the company, so I've already opened it up and taken a look. What can I say, chairwoman? Looks like you're very popular...”

With a slightly uneasy look, Ivano brought out a white envelope with fancy gilding. The seal and the elegant penmanship were identical to those on the letter of apology that had been brought to the Green Tower. She timidly unfolded the message and gave it a read; in summary, it said, “I am indebted to Madam Dahlia Rossetti—contact me if trouble arises. Give me the word and I shall be your noble guardian.” She quizzically tilted her head to one side. “Is it that simple to get someone to be my noble guardian? Even if I'm not that close with him?”

“Lord Diels would bear a great deal of responsibility if anything bad were to happen to you, so it's not exactly a carefree position for him to assume. It's akin to ‘being a guarantor for a big loan,’ in the words of Mr. Forto.”

“How am I supposed to take him up on his offer, then?” Was it because of his sense of honor as a nobleman that he wanted to repay a debt of gratitude? Was it because he still felt guilty? It befuddled Dahlia to no end. What she did know was that the discord between him and Grato had been resolved. Volf reported that he’d seen Gildo and Grato walking down the halls of the castle, chatting and laughing amongst themselves. It seemed as though Volf still didn’t trust Gildo, though; the mention of the marquis’ name had brought wrinkles to his forehead. “Oh, how about I ask Volf? Or would that be weird?”

“Given his family’s title of earl, it shouldn’t be a problem. However, his youth might be a factor. Do take what I say with a grain of salt—I’m hardly knowledgeable about this sort of stuff—but as I see it, it wouldn’t hurt to ask. The Scalfarotto family isn’t quite as powerful as Lord Diels’, but that would only be for another year or so—until the two are at the same rank.”

“Well, I doubt the Scalfarotto would send me a marriage proposal.”

“You never know. Perhaps someone will fall in love with you at first sight at the castle.”

“That sort of stuff only happens to really, really attractive people, you know?” Dahlia said bluntly. The maids and workers at the castle presumably weren’t likely to fall in love at first sight and get married. Even so, as someone who now frequented the castle, it was obvious to Dahlia—the people there, including the maids and workers, all had incredibly good looks. Even in full makeup, she would be nothing but an ugly duckling. As her eyes glazed over, Ivano gently folded the letter back up and tucked it away.

“Now, chairwoman, I’d like to make a request.”

“And what might that be?”

“I ask that you subcontract out as much as possible of the production of the dryers, stoves, and waterproof cloth. We still have to do the final check of the stoves that go to the Beast Hunters; that should, however, free up some time for you to come up with new products and improvements to existing products. Our profits are through the roof, so I encourage you to spend them freely on development.”

“Um, how much money are we talking about?” The thought had Dahlia on the edge of her seat. She might even get to pick up a rare material or two for research and experimentation.

“You can have thirty gold immediately, and in about a month, you can have another seventy.”

“Excuse me?” A gold piece was the equivalent of one hundred thousand yen—in other words, Ivano was talking about ten million yen. That was undoubtedly a ridiculous sum of money for a novice toolmaker and a fledgling company. “Ivano, are you off by a digit there?”

“You’ll have to forgive me, chairwoman. I’m afraid it’ll be another five years before I’ll be able to throw down three hundred gold in cash.”

“No, that’s not what I meant!”

“I jest, I jest. But I *am* also serious.” He fixed his navy blue eyes on Dahlia. “Everything I said is true. Giving you thirty gold pieces right now is no hardship. Be proud, chairwoman; this is the direct result of your foaming soap dispenser, shoe-dryer, and zephyricloth. We have more than enough to cover operating expenses. In five years—and I mean this with all gravity—I *will* get you ten times the money for research and development.”

She looked at the open ledger. In just two months, and especially of late, the black numbers had grown larger and larger. Dahlia had delegated this side of the business to Ivano since production had started on the zephyricloth, and it was jarring for her to learn of the sudden jump in profits. “But... Since when...”

“Whatever do you mean by that, up-and-coming magical toolmaker, advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters, and chairwoman?” Ivano interspersed his words with bouts of laughter. He must’ve realized that the wheels inside Dahlia’s head weren’t spinning, and he pointed to the ceiling. “When you and Fermo created the soap dispensers, Madam Gabriella, who’s sitting upstairs right now, made a tremendous effort promoting them to the aristocrats. Because of that, decorated glass products are all the rage right now. For noblewomen, they’re indispensable for face washing; for noblemen, they’re popular for shaving.”

“Wow. Has it penetrated the market that deeply already?”

“Yes, and the dispensers have just reached the commoner market too. In fact, they’re so trendy right now that stores are selling out the moment they get any stock. Some stores even have waiting lists, and they’re so long that my wife and daughters only got some leftover prototypes from Fermo.”

“I had no clue...” Dahlia hadn’t seen any dispensers when she visited the shops, so she’d been convinced that they weren’t selling. To think that there was a waiting list...

“Ever since we supplied the knights with the shoe-dryer, it’s become a huge hit amongst the noblemen and other workers at the castle. They’re all clamoring to get one for home use. Shoe stores and the Couriers’ Guild have been buying all they can as well. With increased production and a second warehouse, we’ve finally been able to keep up with demand.”

“Two warehouses...” she mumbled to herself. Certainly, they couldn’t be big ones, she thought.

“Finally, there’s the compact magical stove. There are many companies that make their own and outsource the production too, but the ones that *you* make and stamp with the Rossetti name are being sold for three times the price.”

“What? Are ours that unreasonable?”

“No, we wholesale them at around the same price as everyone else. But because our brand has become well-known, the retailers are marking them up.”

Perhaps consumers found peace of mind buying from the inventors of the product. Dahlia recalled home appliance development and sales from her previous life and swore to do better.

Now that the foaming soap dispensers were selling in the quintuple digits, the craftsman Fermo would visit in a few days to discuss warehouses and hiring additional help. Another week after that, Dahlia would learn that the two warehouses for the shoe-dryers were in fact large dockside ones.

Furthermore, there were rumors regarding the Rossetti-stamped compact magical stoves. It was said that the chairwoman of the company shaved down her profits in exchange for the honor of placing her name on the bottom of the

stoves, all in order to help the Order of Beast Hunters. The honest and heroic chairwoman put her name there as a charm to protect the backs of the fighting men, so that they would come home safely from their expeditions. In the taverns, the bards got together and wrote a spoony ballad in praise of the woman named Rossetti, but it was not a tune or a story that Ivano and Dahlia knew.

“Since we’ve been well in the black for the past while,” Ivano said, “I believe some of the money should be put into Ms. Dahlia’s personal coffers, as well as those of the Rossetti Trading Company.”

“Sure, that’s not a problem. Is it better that the accounts be separate?”

“Yes. The numbers we’re dealing with are quite large already, and it makes filing taxes easier as well. And it’s also a benefit to you, as no one else will be able to see what your personal finances are like; that would make things difficult for me and future employees.” It was important to think ahead. The more people the company hired, the more diligent Dahlia had to be about her privacy. Ivano continued, “You may check the ledgers any time you wish. We should also have a scrivener check over our books every two months and write us official reports.”

“I know you’re an honest man, Ivano.”

“While I appreciate the confidence you place in me, not having those reports would be a very bad thing for a company dealing with the castle. Getting audited would be even worse.”

“Oh, right, that makes sense.” Trustworthiness was a big deal for a partner of the castle, and that had to include good bookkeeping.

“Our next shipment of waterproof cloth is shaping up to be a big one too.”

“Did someone find a new way to use it?”

“Nothing new in particular, just the usual wagon bonnets, tents, housewrap, that kind of thing. It might be because we have new sales channels opening up,” he said. Dahlia wondered where the sudden spike in customers or sales came from, but she had little idea how this side of the business worked anyway. “For

the dryers and stoves, we've managed to find enough manufacturers for now, but we lack workshops and magical toolmakers for the waterproof cloth. What I'm hearing is that it's rather difficult to get an even finish on the surface."

"That's right. It requires a steady stream of magic, or else there are a lot of dips and bumps." The truth was that Dahlia had had a hard time making waterproof cloth lately; her magic had increased but her fine control had yet to become stable.

"Do you have anyone in mind that we can hire?"

"Um, I might..." She didn't know if she wanted to give him the name, but as it turned out, she didn't need to.

"Ah, Tobias, is it? Shall I pay a visit to Orlando & Co.? Of course, I'll handle all communication with them." It was impressive how Ivano had glossed over her hesitancy and arrived at the right answer, but come to think of it, the only magical toolmaker whom she was familiar with who made the waterproof cloth was Tobias.

"Sure, but might they be too busy? After all, they're the biggest producers of it in the castle."

"No, their magical tools department has had a lot of free time as of late. Or so I've heard."

"Oh, is that right?" Dahlia didn't mean to probe any further, but those were the words that came out of her mouth. Orlando & Co. should have been busy with orders for the waterproof cloth, dryers, and desiccants, amongst other products. They should have been so busy, they would even need subcontractors working for them.

"Worried?"

"Uh, I mean, I'm not *not* worried."

"Tobias has made himself a bit of an enemy with the Merchants' Guild. He has been receiving fewer orders of magical tools and making fewer connections to vendors. Well, Orlando & Co. has other business as well, so it's not as though they're about to go bankrupt any time soon. Unless you will it, chairwoman."

“What exactly do you mean by that?” Dahlia understood his words but not his implication.

“The Rossetti Trading Company has guarantors in the person of the master of the Merchants’ Guild, Volf of Earldom Scalfarotto, a co-developer in the master of the Tailors’ Guild, slime farming interests with the Adventurers’ Guild, official purveyor status for the Order of Beast Hunters, and a chairwoman who is an advisor for the Beast Hunters and soon to be baroness. We are well-armed, so to say. If you have reservations about Orlando & Co., you have the power to assert your influence.”

“Ivano, just what are you suggesting...?”

“Chairwoman—no, Ms. Dahlia, I ask you for your honest thoughts. Do you have reservations about Orlando?” Never had those navy blue eyes looked more like ice. “If you never wish to see Tobias again, you can have him gone from the capital. If you have to settle a score with Orlando & Co., give it some time and they will undoubtedly go out of business. You needn’t show mercy. If you so wish, Ms. Dahlia, just give me the word.”

She took a moment to let his words sink in, but her own words, when they followed, came out strangely hoarse, shocking even herself. “No, Ivano, it’s all in the past.”

“You are still young, Ms. Dahlia. You have as much a future in love and marriage as you do in work. If the breaking off of your engagement is still binding you down, wouldn’t you say it would be better to break those chains once and for all and start anew?”

Ah, so that was it—Ivano’s words finally made sense now. Dahlia had avoided talking about love and marriage and had refused all proposals that she marry rich, so he had been worrying that her past relationship with Tobias was tying her down. But it wasn’t true. She had never felt freer than now. Tobias’s brother Ireneo had already apologized on behalf of the Orlandos and their company. Never had she felt more fulfilled with life, spending her days having fun with her friends—including Volf—and working with Ivano, Fermo, and the rest of the Gandolfi Workshop. She didn’t bear any resentment towards Tobias or the Orlandos. Though the pain might still linger, her engagement was already

a scar—rather, without her even realizing, it had *become* a scar.

“Ivano, thank you very much for your concern. I’m truly fine. Right now, I’m not thinking about romance or wherever that may lead. Not only do I have my work to focus on, having fun with my friends is also a top priority of mine. So, please, do not do anything to Orlando & Co. Treat them like any other company—we will interact with them if we have business, so keep those bridges unburned.”

“Understood. It seems that I read too much into things, and for that I apologize. But don’t forget this either, chairwoman: I’m aiming to become your right-hand man. I want as many of your honest thoughts and opinions as I can get. Of course, I don’t presume that I can meet all of your expectations...”

“Thank you. You’ve already met all my expectations and have surpassed them ten times over. Be proud of yourself too, Ivano.” If she didn’t have Ivano to rely on for the business side of things, the company wouldn’t be where it was at. Merchandise management, operations, accounting, dealings with the nobility, and his counsel—his help so far had been immeasurable, and what lay ahead would be riding on him as well. He was well past being just the right hand. “I don’t think you need to aim to become my right-hand man either. You alone manage half of the company and all of the business—you’ve already become the whole right side of the body that is the Rossetti Trading Company.”

All of a sudden, Ivano covered his face with both hands and folded over. “Hngk...”



“Wh-What’s wrong?! Are you feeling unwell or...”

“No, I’m fine. To receive praise from you so directly is just, well, a little embarrassing for me...”

“Oh, no, did I say something weird again? I didn’t make a fool of myself with a saying or anything, did I?” Dahlia panicked; the regular occurrence of unintentionally making romantic gestures had traumatized her.

“No, you’re okay. I’m just feeling bashful because of your high praise. There’s also the fact that I made a grave promise to my wife to ‘never show my blushing face to another woman...’”

She understood that to mean she mustn’t look at Ivano’s face right now, and so she kept her eyes glued to the open ledger on the desk. She flipped through the pages and realized that Ivano’s wages hadn’t changed one bit since the founding of the company. “Oh, I forgot! I promised you I’d give you a raise once we started turning a profit. Let’s add as many zeros as we can to your salary!”

“I sincerely thank you for the raise starting this month. I’m sure my wife will be very pleased as well,” Ivano said with great humor, but from the gaps between his fingers, his face presumably still tinged pink.

Afterwards, the two of them continued to discuss business, though their gazes seemed to be magnetically repelled from one another. Dahlia did not see Ivano’s tears that day.

The Forest Serpent's Slip

Underneath bright blue skies streaked with white, as if put there by the bristles of a brush, the Order of Beast Hunters had mobilized to a grassy plain a short distance from the highway to do some mowing. More accurately, they were trimming the black tendrils of devil nettles. The monsters' black arms crept through the tall grass, coiling around any unsuspecting victims who walked too close, and sucked their blood dry. It was a hazard that needed to be kept at bay, but the task was no easy feat—the vines' sharp thorns meant pain when they pierced armor and skin, and their barbs meant more pain in trying to remove them. Passersby were generally safe from the threat, but travelers and their horses straying off the path would become monster feed. And though the devil nettles stayed away from the highway, their prolific growth this year called for the Beast Hunters' services.

"Doesn't seem nearly as bad this year," said one knight.

"Only because we had Volf and Kirk," replied another.

"Volf really swings that scythe like nobody else. Ain't called the Black Reaper for nothin', I s'pose."

The chatty knights watched the scarlet-clad Volf dance through the field, as though neither his instrument nor his body weighed much more than the grass surrounding him. The process was not as leisurely as it looked, though—he sprinted from cluster to cluster, slicing off the vines that reached out towards him. Matching his pace were Dorino and a handful of squadmates, all wielding scythes of their own. The rookie Kirk and other mages blasted the Scarlet Armors with air magic, assisting them with a tailwind. This supporting role—speeding up the front line—was a new practice; in previous years, the mages had used their powers to attack the devil nettles directly.

"First line, initial mowing complete!" the knights sounded off.

"Second line, support the mages and advance!" came a new order.

The mages, protected by the knights, combined fire and water magic and scalded the devil nettles at medium range, stunning them into sluggishness.

“All units, cut down the area!” The Scarlet Armor vanguards and the rest of the knights hacked away at the devil nettles with scythes and spears, clearing the area in no time.

After the cull, the knights marched to their campsite farther along the highway.

“Ugh. Couldn’t we just get rid of all of them?” grumbled a young knight as he sucked the blood out of a wound in the back of his hand; those barbs must’ve pierced through his leather gloves.

“Get rid of too many of them and there’ll be nothing keeping the monsters in the woods, which would make these roads a lot more dangerous. And apparently, the devil nettles make for a good medicine against some kind of uncommon but very infectious disease,” said an older member of the order.

“That makes sense. I guess it’s not like they can cultivate the monster within city walls for medicine.” The young knight sighed as he stared at the hole in his leather glove, likely bitter because it looked so new.

“You can get that patched up no problem. Just send it out to the tailors in the castle repair shop; they’ll mend it for free.”

“Oh, it’s not that. These gloves were a gift, and I’m just feeling a little down that she might be worried sick for me.”

“*She*? Your girlfriend? Fiancée?”

The young knight muttered the truth. “My mother...”

Dorino clapped him three times on the back, while the other members smiled warmly in silence.

Volf peeled off his sweaty gloves and gently wiped down his sköll bracelet with a handkerchief. He thought about Dahlia’s fair and delicate wrist and her gold protective bracelet—the one that completely protected her from poison,

confusion, petrification, soporifics, anesthetics, and even aphrodisiacs. She was borrowing it from Oswald until she could make one of her own. Volf had wanted her to get it over with, but it seemed as though it wasn't that easy to craft.

Dahlia's bracelet had four different rare materials of four different colors embedded in the inside: the white piece was unicorn horn, black was bicorn horn, red was fire dragon scale, and green was forest serpent heart. She already had some unicorn horn on hand, and she had recently acquired some bicorn horn from the mutant that Volf had slain. All that was left to assemble were the fire dragon scale and the forest serpent heart.

Fire dragons were said to live far to the south, though Volf had never seen one before. Their scales showed up for sale in auctions from time to time, so perhaps Guido could be persuaded to help. On the other hand, forest serpents lived in a much broader area, but it was quite uncommon to come across one. The Beast Hunters had come across one during the titan frog hunt a while back. Unfortunately, Volf had been too busy writing his report on the toe socks and had missed out on it. He would've put in a reservation for the monster's heart if he had known she would need one. He prayed to the gods that he would encounter one soon for Dahlia's sake.

"Hm? What's that noise?" Something heavy was dragging itself along the forest floor and snapping off twigs and branches in its path.

"Whatever it is, it's headed our way." The knights readied their weapons and got into formation, catching glimpses of a green giant weaving between the tall trees. Its torso was as wide as a trunk and stretched on for some distance, and its black-speckled green eyes sparkled in joy at the sight of a big meal.

It was a forest serpent, or the Green King. Seldom did travelers or merchants encounter one, but when they did, they would sacrifice their cargo and horses and pray that they could get away safely.

"Hisssss!" The threatening call of the ruler of the woods echoed in the sky.

Apparently, someone must've heard Volf and answered his prayers right away. "Speak of the, er, serpent! I'm in luck!"

Dorino clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, that's a forest serpent. You were

looking for one, Volf?”

“Yeah, Dahlia wants its parts,” he said, showing a broad smile.

None of the men were afraid or nervous; they chatted as normal. “Miss Dahlia needs something? We ought to slay it, then,” suggested one of the knights.

“Okay, let’s do it. Encircle the monster and make sure it doesn’t get away.”

“Mages, could you please flank the forest serpent and immobilize it? The bow knights will take front and center.”

“Got it. Oh, but we should be careful to not damage its parts, right?”

“Hey Volf, which part does Madam Rossetti need?”

“The heart.”

The knights then turned their attention to the snake; its dark green tongue flicked out as if a question mark had popped up above its head. “Hisssss...” it called out, seemingly less confident than before, almost as though it understood their conversation, even if only a little.

“Captain, do we have permission to—sir, not the Ash-Hand! You’ll cremate the whole thing!”

“Hm? Oh, right.” At the knight’s strong reminder, Grato sheathed his magical sword; the gray blade had already started smoking in anticipation of the action. “Well, I don’t want to ruin the monster, so I may as well sit this one out. Our squad’s own madam toolmaker has requested its parts, so permission granted.”

“Aye, sir. A show of hands: who would like to volun—oh, enthusiastic bunch today.” Every knight had a hand up—wiseguy Dorino even raised both. “Bow knights and mages, hold the monster in place! Volf, since you’ve got the details, you take the lead!”

“Thank you! I believe Dahlia is planning to crystallize it, so it doesn’t matter if the heart is in two or three pieces, just as long as it doesn’t get burned up,” Volf explained. “Let’s get into large monster formation one, go easy on the magic, then fell it in a single shot once we bind it down.”

“Bind it and cut it. Understood. Should we harvest its other parts too?”

“The skin should sell well. Since the castle hasn’t put in a request for anything, we can pass it off to the Adventurers’ Guild this time. Couldn’t hurt to get some fresh meat for chow either.”

As they discussed amongst themselves, the bow knights and mages did as instructed; the whistling of greatbow arrows flying through the air drowned out the hisses and the snapping of branches as the serpent struggled. Mages continued by evoking air magic to blind the monster while the knights reformed their line.

But as Volf got into position, the memory of the time when he and Marcello had gone out to drink cropped up. “Now that you mention it, when I went drinking down in the city, I heard that forest serpent is a bit of a delicacy. I haven’t tried it myself, but it purportedly ‘fortifies and invigorates the body,’ whatever that means.”

“Hm. Worth a shot if it can relieve my fatigue.”

“Sure doesn’t *look* appetizing. It’s not exactly lean meat, right?”

“It isn’t too bad if grilled over an open flame, though it’s a little pricey for commonfolk. Dried serpent is also popular with guys in the city center,” Dorino explained with sword in hand to the two older knights. “As it is, it’s fatty and rich, kind of like an oily fish or particularly pungent poultry. It goes great with strong seasoning.”

“Hey, we’ve still got a jar of dipping sauce that Dahlia made for the squad,” Volf said to everyone’s excitement.

“That sounds like a plan!”

“I bet it’d go down great with a drink too!”

“There’s no shortage of meat either. A monster that size would feed the whole squad twice over.”

The men clamored and drooled as they set their sights on the forest serpent—a look it had likely never encountered before in its prey.

“H-Hisssss...?”

It was a look signaling that the hunter had become the hunted.

Given that the prey was outnumbered by so many predators, the fight wrapped up in a flash. The process of butchering the monster and moving its parts took much longer in comparison, given the size of it all.

The plan was to make camp here, then begin the journey back to the capital first thing at dawn. The slightly sloped field made for a good resting place for the men and their horses. When mealtime came around, some knights lit fires, but most of them brought out their camp stoves. The man with eyes of liquid gold inspected his own stove, stamped “Rossetti,” then set it on top of the waterproof cloth.

Dorino came asking, “Yo, Volf, which one would you like: beef or the spoils of our battle? Or both?”

“I’m good. I’ve brought my own.”

“What do you have in there?” He pointed to Volf’s leather sack chilling on some ice crystals.

“It’s leftover beef from lunch that I’ve got marinating.” It was the same barbecue sauce that Dahlia had made for the rest of the squad, but this one was tweaked just a little bit—lighter on the honey, heavier on the ginger, and with a slightly different balance of herbs and spices to suit Volf’s tastes.

“Ah, so it’s Ms. Dahlia’s cooking, then? Lucky bastard...”

“I offer you a trade,” said Randolph.

“No, thank you!”

“Aw, come on, man. At least share your secret sauce. We’re leaving first thing in the morning, so it’s not like you’ll be able to finish it all anyway,” Dorino said, sighing.

Volf weighed his options. “Two spoonfuls. And ten people max.”

“How stingy can you be, *Earl* Scalfarotto?! Hell, your family’s about to rise to the rank of marquis!”

“That has nothing to do with anything!” As the schoolboys argued, there was a tug on Volf’s sleeve.

“Um, would you please give me some, Sir Volf?” Kirk pleaded. “I’ll give you half of my wine in exchange.”

Volf looked into his green puppy-dog eyes and lost the battle of wills. “Oh, uh, sure...”

The older knights started whispering amongst themselves. “Damn. Kirk’s a force to be reckoned with.”

“Fine. I offer you a spoon of jam in exchange,” Randolph said.

“I’m not huge on sweets...”

“Oh, but it’s from the store that Miss Dahlia introduced me to?”

“Forget about the trade for a moment, Randolph. When and where did your conversation take place?” Volf glared at his friend.

Randolph looked back with a coy smile. “Hm. I wonder...”

“Ease up on the teasing, Randolph! He’s about to start seething real soon,” chided Dorino. “And Volf, you can stand to be a little more generous. The rest of you can roshambo for some!” What followed was a series of desperate battles of rock paper scissors that lasted for quite some time.

“They’re like children on their first field trip,” said the grizzled knight with a tired smile. The young’uns were having a blast grilling and sharing food with each other. Another senior knight went over to them, as though to tell the boys to behave themselves, but in reality, he ended up joining in on the action.

“They’ve grown soft.”

“It’s fine. I can tell they’re still vigilant about their surroundings, and they all have their weapons at their side,” the captain reassured him. “Expeditions might just be like this from now on. They’ll fight well when it’s time to fight, eat well when it’s time to eat, and sleep well when it’s time to sleep. Everyone will share laughs, then get home safely. Isn’t that all we can ask for?”

The grizzled knight grimaced at the sentiment.

“Does it bother you?” Grato asked.

“If I may be honest, sir, I’m a little miffed. Not because they’re doing anything

wrong, but..." He trailed off in search of the right words. "I can't help but regret that this didn't happen sooner."

"You're going to be labeled an old man if you keep counting missed opportunities in anger, you know?" Grato retrieved a silver flask from his breast pocket and began filling a pair of wooden cups.

"Might I remind you, captain, that I *am* an old man. Anyway, what is this?" He narrowed his eyes at the cup that Grato put into his hands. A fragrant nose rose from the amber liquid, which seemed all too precious to be drunk any other way than neat.

"A fine liquor from a friend. We can't let the kids have all the fun. But I've only got enough for the three of us, so keep it on the down-low," Grato said with a wink. The third portion quenched the blade of the Ash-Hand, which now sat unsheathed.

The grizzled knight silently brought his cup to eye level, toasting their departed comrades. There had been those fallen who could not be brought home, and Grato had had to drive his sword into their bodies to prevent them from being eaten by monsters and animals. It was a visceral sensation he could never forget, and it was one he did not care to experience ever again.

When the ashen sword had drunk up all of the alcohol, Grato put it back into its scabbard. He did like the sword had and downed his drink in one shot; the liquor brought him some comfort as it nestled inside him.

As the golden spirits vanished, two more pools of gold appeared inside of the tent. "Would you care for some forest serpent, sir? You might be surprised by how good it is," offered Volf in a cheery voice.

"I've had some before on previous expeditions. Can't say I really enjoy how greasy it is..."

"We rendered some of the fat out by slowly grilling it, and it turned out really good paired with Dahlia's sauce."

The captain eyed the meat neatly laid out on the grill grate. "I'll try some."

Volf brought the barbecue closer to Grato, enticing him with the mouthwatering smoky scent. "Sir, I have a request, but I know that it may be

out of line.”

“Ask away.”

“There is more forest serpent than we can carry home in our wagons, so I’m wondering if we could have you use the Ash-Hand to dehydrate the leftovers...”

“And wholesale it to the Adventurers’ Guild?”

“Not exactly, sir. I’m hoping to give the dried meat out to whoever would like some. One of the more senior knights said that he didn’t have the heart to go home and complain about how tiring his expeditions had been. Forest snake is also said to be nutritious and to revitalize the body, making it very popular with working-class men. I’m not sure if it’s true or not, but hopefully it can help the boys out.”

“I’m sure you know, Volf, the captain’s sword isn’t a food dehydrator.” The grizzled knight’s admonishment seemed to have taken the wind out of Volf’s sails.

The Grato of the past would have likely refused as well. Ash-Hand was the same sword that slew monsters and friends alike; it wouldn’t be fitting to make jerky with it. But the captain resolved to put that behind him. His men were cooking, laughing, drinking, and eating together—they were enjoying their time with each other. The lives of monsters and friends had paid for this moment, so they may as well enjoy the gifts they were given. “Why not? I’ll do it. The Ash-Hand hasn’t seen much action as of late; I wouldn’t want to have it start rusting in its scabbard.”

“Thank you very much, sir!” Volf bowed gratefully as he presented his superiors with the perfectly grilled skewers.

Grato accepted the grate with a smile of his own. “Dibs on the jerky.”

Tea Party with a Friend's Brother

The Rossetti Trading Company's headquarters—that is to say, Volf's house—was just as impressive as Oswald's mansion. The three-story building featured brilliant white walls and a blue roof, grass as green as could be, and a garden with pastel-colored flowers in full bloom. This was merely the Scalfarotto family villa. How could their main residence be any grander?

Today's invitation came from Volf's brother Guido, the eldest son of the Scalfarottos and a marquis-in-waiting. Originally, her invitation had also included Ivano as her attendant, but he had been summoned to the castle just moments before they departed. He'd said that he would come as soon as his obligations concluded, but given the people he was meeting, it would be unthinkable to rush them. Fortunately, Volf was free today and would be present.

In the end, Dahlia had come alone. She took a deep breath; she was nervous—but not afraid—of making a gaffe. She alighted from the carriage, whereupon a servant of the household acted as her guide. An incredibly thick and heavy set of doors (so heavy that Dahlia doubted she could open them by herself) separated the manor from the outside world and led to a sun-filled foyer. What few decorations were in here dazzled in the light; the modest quantity said old money. As Dahlia proceeded down a hallway lined with blue carpeting, a painting, positioned away from the sun's rays, caught her eye. It was the portrait of a beautiful noblewoman: hair long and dark like ebony, skin pale as snow, lips tinted pink, and deep, dark brown eyes curving upward ever so slightly, gently smiling at passersby. It had to be Volf's mother, and she must have been even more breathtaking in person—Dahlia's intuition screamed so.

"That is a painting of the late Lady Vanessa Scalfarotto, the earl's third wife. Lady Vanessa passed away from illness when Sir Volfred was still a young child," explained the servant.

Dahlia smiled politely. "I see. Thank you very much," she said as she

continued walking. Nothing could be further from the truth—Volf’s mother had been murdered in a bout of internal strife—but it wasn’t exactly something to tell guests. Dahlia couldn’t help but wonder what Volf thought whenever he passed by the portrait. It couldn’t be anything pleasant.

When Dahlia arrived at the parlor, she was met by a man with steel, almost blue-gray, hair. He didn’t resemble Volf much, and his calm demeanor made him seem more like a bureaucrat than a knight. Perhaps there was something too perfect about his features; he was almost doll-like. “Welcome, Madam Rossetti. I’m Guido Scalfarotto, Volf’s elder brother. I’d like to thank you for always treating my brother so kindly.”

“My name is Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company, and I thank you for the same.” She was sure she’d come on time, but the third chair was empty.

Dahlia’s interest must’ve been too obvious, though.

“If you’re curious about Volf, he will be coming in about an hour, as I had hoped to speak with you privately first. Oh, and by privately, I mean that my personal attendant will also be in the room. I hope that is fine with you?”

“Yes, of course.” It wasn’t until now that she realized there was a third person in the room.

Standing by the wall was his servant, dressed in a black uniform. His hair was the color of rust and, despite his downward-turned gaze, his eyes looked to be the same color too. He was tall and dark, reminiscent of those from the desert.

Ordinarily, guests wouldn’t be greeting servants, but Dahlia dipped her head at him, then he at her. She had on a straight face, though she worried she had committed another faux pas.

Guido waited for her to sit down on the black leather couch after the servant gestured for her to do so. “I’d like to thank you, as well, for saving Volf after he was carried off by the wyvern, for crafting his fairy glass eyeglasses, and for your inventions for the Order of Beast Hunters. I hear that you have him as a guest quite often too, and I’m very grateful that my brother has such a great friend.”

“I am very grateful to have such a great friend as well.”

“Hm.” Guido took the briefest glance at the window, then looked back into her eyes. “Madam Rossetti, I have a question for you. If I were to ask you to part from Volf, how much would that cost?”

“Huh?” It wasn’t a graceful response, but to a question like this one that came from left field, Dahlia had no prepared answer.

Just as she was about to ask him for clarification, he continued. “Sorry, that was a strange way of phrasing it. I’d appreciate it if you would hear me out to the very end. I truly do appreciate all that you’ve done for Volf up until now.” His words fell on her ears like icicles. “I understand that there isn’t much of a gap in social status between you two. However, before long, you may become a spot of weakness to my brother. It isn’t so unreasonable to say that it would be better for Volf, socially and in business, if you two weren’t involved with each other. Of course, if I were to make this request, it would only be fair that I compensate you. How does two hundred or even three hundred gold sound? Better yet, name your price.”

“That would be unnecessary. If you wish for me to stop being friends with Sir Volf, then so be it. If I am causing him any trouble, then I shall keep my distance from him for his sake.” The thought had always lurked in the back of Dahlia’s mind that one day she might have to part from Volf, whether because of the differences in status between them, the demands of work, familial circumstances, or even because of Volf’s romantic life or a prospective marriage—the potential reasons were countless. If she needed to stay away from him, then she needed to be able to stand on her own without his protection. Though she was deeply appreciative of everything Volf had done for her thus far, it wouldn’t be reasonable to ask for money or anything else as his replacement.

“If you’re to distance yourself from him, I can even promise you a more powerful noble to act as your company’s guarantor.”

“No, thank you.” She had recently gained the titles of the Beast Hunters’ purveyor and resident advisor on magical tools, but before that, her company had had the protection of Leone and Volf; it would be a wise idea to trade up, so to say. But the truth was that Guido’s suggestion hurt her deeply.

“No need to hesitate. We don’t even need to tell Volf about it.”

“No, thank you.”

“Then, Madam Rossetti, is there truly nothing you want for parting with Volf?”

His incredulous voice and his oversaturated blue eyes were too much, and Dahlia was about to cast her head downwards. For some reason, though, her mind was suddenly full of the image of Volf—her treasured yet seemingly fleeting friend—smiling. If staying away from him meant protecting him, then she would do it in a heartbeat. If she were never to see him again, then she would be proud to have been his friend—but that wasn’t something she could do, were it a transaction. She would stick to her guns on this one thing, even if she were speaking to Volf’s elder brother or an earl. Volf was her treasured friend. And hadn’t she promised herself that she would hold her head up high?

Dahlia stopped herself from looking down at the ground. She looked Guido dead in the eyes. “I truly want nothing for it. If you, Lord Scalfarotto, were to leave a friend because of the trouble you brought them, if you were told to stop being friends with someone, would you have a price?” She tried her damndest to project her words with as much confidence as possible, yet she couldn’t keep her voice from trembling at the end.

“Hm. Good point...” Guido’s expression softened, as if his true intentions had finally come to light. He stood from his seat and bowed at a right angle.

“Madam Rossetti, from the bottom of my heart, I apologize for testing you.”

Dahlia rushed to do the same. “No, I should apologize for my rudeness. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Please don’t worry; you haven’t done anything wrong. I hope we can speak as honestly as possible from here on out,” he said. “I was worried. I was unsure what exactly my little brother is to you, Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“I’m sorry, what do you mean exactly...?”

“To Volf, I have no doubts that you are a great friend. But I had to find out whether you regarded the relationship between the two of you as merely a business arrangement or whether you shared his feelings of friendship.

Businesspeople have different priorities; they care more for wealth and connections. My question was a roundabout way of clarifying that.”

Believe it or not, this situation hadn’t been covered in the book of noble etiquette, and so Dahlia had to rack her brains to come up with a fitting response. “I understand that it’s not my place to say so and I hope you can forgive me for it, but my relationship with Sir Volf is not a business arrangement. He is my dear friend. I hope that clarifies things for you.”

“It very much does. Again, I’m terribly sorry to have done this to you. I know I’m far too old to worry like this, but...” Guido trailed off for a moment. “Volf has the worst luck with women. He’s my baby brother, but the more I learn about what’s going on around him, the more I worry.” That much was obvious just by the look of his face.

“I see...” She knew full well of Volf’s circumstances, but talking to Guido about them seemed like a bad idea, and so she didn’t probe any further.

“Looks like you know about it too. Lately, I’ve been thinking all his problems would be solved if he turned into a little piggy. Double his size, and he’d be able to live life in peace.”

“There might be some truth to that, but I wouldn’t want his health to deteriorate...” she said in all seriousness.

Guido broke into a big grin. “You’ve got a point there,” he said. “Anyway, I know that I’ve given just the worst possible first impression, so I hope you’ll allow me to make amends.”

The servant had already opened the door before his master finished his sentence. From the hallway came a cart loaded with two different kinds of pastries, a heaping pile of cookies, and a white tea set trimmed in silver.

“Our chefs really outdid themselves this time. We have cheesecake, strawberry tart, and shortbread—that was Volf’s favorite as a child, and I’m sure he still loves them now. For tea, we have the green variety from Esterland.”

“Thank you very much.” Those were exactly to her tastes—too exact. Volf had once apologized for Guido ordering an investigation into her. It was what it was;

the Scalfarottos were a family of earls, and if they worried about their Volf, then a background check on her wasn't out of the question. She led an extremely ordinary life, and whatever they dug up couldn't have been too exciting anyhow. It was a teensy bit embarrassing that they knew her favorite foods, but she was grateful for such a warm welcome.

"Please, enjoy," said Guido's attendant after serving both master and guest a slice of the cake.

The fancy cheesecake Dahlia had had with the knights in the castle had been great, but this down-to-earth version showcased the flavor profile of the cheese as it enveloped her tongue. The filling was sweet, but not saccharine, which allowed the sugary crust to shine through. She then took a sip of the green tea—the hint of astringency did well to balance the sweetness—and her mind was flooded with memories of her old home. Esterland green tea ran about ten times the price of ordinary black tea; it would be wrong to just chug it, but it went all too well with the cheesecake.

"What do you think, Madam Rossetti?"

She looked up from her plate and said solemnly, "It's very good." Guido looked pleased to hear it. By the time she looked back down, her empty plate had already traded places with a fresh one bearing a tart. The way the flash of bright red suddenly appeared before her eyes made her look at the servant, who was standing to the side of their table.

"The tart is absolutely delightful, and I hope you enjoy," he said.

"Oh, um, thank you very much." Had the man moved at such extraordinary speed because of how strongly he recommended the dessert? Or was it part of the show? He was so unbelievably quick that Dahlia had nearly failed to notice him move.

Whatever the explanation, it didn't make the strawberry tart any less delicious. After making sure Guido had started on it, Dahlia took a bite as well. The cute round shortcrust had so many tart strawberries piled on top that the velvety custard in the middle was hardly visible. The combination couldn't be better—the sugary pastry cream rounded off the bright and sour fruit. As she sipped on the green tea, she swore to do without dinner tonight and blocked

the thought of calories from her mind.

Guido, sitting diagonally across from her, reached for the cookies. He offered some for her to try, but she could not fit a third dessert in her. The host, though, had no “excess padding” anywhere on his body; his calories must have simply vanished into the thin air. It was hardly fair.

A soft clearing of the throat came from the servant, and his rusty eyes narrowed at his master. He whispered at the bare minimum volume to be audible. “Smaller portion for Guido’s dinner tonight, then...”

As Dahlia finished her second cup of green tea, there was a knock at the door.

“Dahlia, welcome! You’re here early,” exclaimed Volf.

She couldn’t help but worry that it wasn’t proper, but Guido was none too bothered. “Thank you very much for the invitation today. I, erm, came here early and had some cake and tea,” Dahlia said.

“Guido...?” Volf must’ve sensed something was up by the slight hesitation in her voice. He eyed his brother suspiciously.

“Yup, we had some cheesecake. Like I said last time, we ought to give the chefs a sense of purpose in their jobs, remember? Well, that and I didn’t want to have you suffer through your dreaded meal of nothing but desserts either,” he said with as much composure as possible before turning to Dahlia. “Oh, Madam Rossetti, feel free to tell Volf all about our conversation afterwards.”

“Um...”

“Don’t worry. You needn’t hide anything from him.” His slightly worried look belied the confidence of his words—something that reminded Dahlia slightly of Volf.

“Lord Scalfarotto, I hope it isn’t inappropriate to say so, but, uh, perhaps you should tell him yourself. I’m afraid that placing me in between the two of you may make it too indirect.”

“Indirect, eh? I see. You make a good point. It’s not something I should have you do,” he said. “Volf, come take a seat beside Madam Rossetti.”

The younger brother had listened and looked on with distrust, but he finally took his seat.

Guido continued, “I had Madam Rossetti come an hour earlier, as I wanted to chat with her privately, you see.”

“What for, brother?”

“We talked about the company, how you’re a guarantor, achieving purveyor status, and her advisory role—well, actually, that was all just a pretense. What I really wanted to find out was whether she was a weak point of yours. I wanted to ascertain for myself what kind of a person she is, and what kind of a person *you* are to her.”

“Couldn’t you have just asked me? I fail to see why you would have to do such a thing to Dahlia...”

“This is what I asked her: ‘If I were to ask you to part from Volf, how much would that cost?’”

“Guido!”

When Volf snapped at him, so did a freeze. It was like suddenly being encased in ice. The servant instantly appeared by Guido’s side. His left hand already had a sword in it and his right hand was resting on the hilt of another; his stance indicated he was ready to draw it at any second. Dahlia clenched her jaw as she struggled to breathe under the intimidation. Her fingers felt frozen, but she couldn’t even move to look at them. Neither Guido nor his attendant seemed to be affected, though.

Guido explained, “Madam Rossetti answered by saying it would be unnecessary. No money nor replacement guarantor could sway her. If being friends with you brought you trouble, then she would distance herself from you, she said.”

“I have no intentions of ending our friendship or distancing myself from her.”

“And that’s great. I’m glad that you have a friend who isn’t enraptured by your looks. As your brother, I know how important that is to you. I’m truly, truly happy for you.”

The frigid air dissipated from the room, and Dahlia could finally breathe again. “Thank you very much...” Volf said, responding. “But I hope you will avoid causing Dahlia trouble in the future; I’m not sure if my heart could take it again.”

“That’s my line. I see your intimidation has improved again,” Guido said with a smile.

His servant quietly made his way to Dahlia’s side. “Excuse me, ma’am, but your hair seems to have become disheveled. This way, if you please.”

“Th-Thank you...” She confidently took the servant’s white-gloved hand and calmly stood up, as if nothing had happened. Without so much as a word between the two of them, she followed him to the door.

Volf began to stand up as well, but a pair each of rust and blue eyes demanded that he sit back down. “Where’s Dahlia going?” Seeing her and Jonas leave the room brought him much displeasure.

His brother heaved a great sigh. “Volf, you really ought to learn how to treat ladies. What were you thinking unleashing your intimidation like that while sitting beside her? You’re fortunate that Madam Rossetti could withstand it somewhat, despite not being a knight herself...”

Volf, halfway between standing and sitting again, only now noticed the frost floating around Guido’s right hand.

“Sit down, Volf. Just wait patiently.”

“But where did Dahlia go?”

Guido cleared his throat and looked out the window. “The washroom?”



Dahlia heaved a great sigh of relief. She couldn’t be gladder to have been taken to the washroom—Volf’s icy intimidation had almost made her go before she made it. Unfortunately, a maid, having heard that Dahlia had spilled some tea on herself, brought her a full set of clothes—undergarments included. She refused the offer with all her might; a misunderstanding would have been absolutely dreadful, but having to explain that it was a misunderstanding would

have been even worse. If Volf were to get the wrong idea, then Dahlia would sprint back home and bury herself in a hole.

It took Dahlia fifteen minutes before she could leave the washroom with a decent-enough poker face. From there, the maid led her out to the annex in the garden. The building was flanked by greenery on two sides, and the path to the entrance was lined with flowers. It was large enough to be a commoner's house, like a villa for the villa.

Inside, Volf looked excited by the four compact magical stoves laid out on top of the pure white tabletop with heaps of familiar ingredients by each of them. It went without saying what his intentions were. Dahlia avoided making eye contact with him and instead stood quietly by a wall.

"Guido said that he would also like to try cooking with the stoves, so we decided to switch from doing a tea party to this," Volf said.

"And what do you have for us today, Volf?" Guido asked. "I don't recognize the food on the table."

"These are crimson cattle skewers, dried kraken legs, quick-cured green squid, an assortment of vegetables, and some sauce." Recently, Volf had been in a cured foods phase, as he and Dahlia had been grilling all sorts of dried and cured foods at the tower.

Though they were away from the main building, this annex was still furnished with the fanciest and most exquisite pieces; it was in no way suitable to run four stoves in this room. Not to mention, while crimson beef was a premium meat, skewers and dried seafood were hardly food fit for nobles. Dahlia felt oddly responsible for such an insulting meal, even though Volf was the one who'd prepared and served everything today. She walked over to his side and said, "Um, are you sure we should grill in here?"

"Oh, right. We should open all the windows first."

"Even with all the windows open, the smells are still going to get into the carpet and walls." Though it would be thematically congruent, the aqua carpeting hardly needed the fishy odor of dried seafood. The oil painting of a field of flowers, the ivory wallpaper with butterflies, the furnishings light in color—it would be sacrilege to get smoke and grease onto everything in the

room.

Guido chimed in. “How about we do this outside? If we go to the west side of the garden, no one will see us standing and eating. And with Jonas and Volf here, we won’t need guards with us either.”

The servant, standing behind his master, quietly said, “Lord Guido, standing and eating is a boorish suggestion...”

Guido gave no indication of resistance. “Let’s call it a party. Then it’d be natural to stand while eating,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to cook outside and dig into skewers with Volf, but seeing how I’m posted at the castle, I could never tag along on an expedition with the Beast Hunters.” The way he smiled made him look younger than his brother. But Volf was even happier to hear that, almost as if he were enticing another kid to do something really naughty.

Dahlia knew she had no right to dissuade them from the uncivilized act. She looked over and met the servant’s rust-colored eyes, which, like her own, were filled with a mix of weariness and wariness. Words were unnecessary; they both knew they shared the feeling of needing to do something but being able to do nothing. And thus began the so-called standing party.

Behind the annex where the strange sudden standing party had begun, the sunlight spilled over the turf, but the breeze seemingly wanted to blow it all away. Jonas stood away from the table; he was a personal attendant and a bodyguard—he knew his station. Not like he had intended to join the meal in the first place anyway.

“Master Jonas, come! Please join us,” beckoned Volf.

The redhead couldn’t hide her surprise at how he addressed the servant. Dahlia Rossetti was her name—some up-and-coming chairwoman whom Volf had been concerned with. Jonas had assumed she must be a real head-turner, but the truth was that the most striking thing about her was her red hair; she was meek and demure otherwise. Not a bad thing, but in the castle, someone like her would amount to nothing but a doormat.

Jonas responded, “I shall refrain.”

The boy then told his friend how he was learning swordsmanship from his talented teacher. Jonas thought it careless and too trusting; he even hid his skill with the blade from his own family.

“I think we can afford to let our guard down a little here, wouldn’t you say, Master Jonas? I’d like to think the grounds here are quite well-guarded.”

“Lord Volf, surely it would be disrespectful to Madam Rossetti if a blighted person like me were to be admitted to dine in her presence,” Jonas said. Rossetti’s widened eyes were now set on him; must’ve been news to her.

Guido asked, “Does that bother you, Madam Rossetti? Jonas is from a viscount family as well, actually.”

“No, not at all,” she said. “In that case, as a commoner, I should be the one to refrain from participating...”

“See, Jonas? Now you’ve made Madam Rossetti feel bad,” Guido chastised him jokingly. “Come on, join us.”

It was hardly an enticing offer—a meal during which he’d have to mind his manners around a guest—but placate his masters Jonas must. “Very well.” He took his place by Guido’s side, then joined the toast with a glass of white wine.

“One for each of you,” said Volf, offering Guido and Jonas skewers of thick-cut crimson cattle.

Jonas couldn’t imagine it’d be any better than if it were still dripping with blood, but he had expectations to meet, and he pressed the meat on the hot grill grate of the compact magical stove. After the redness had been grilled away on one side, a drizzle of the dark sauce made its way onto the meat.

“Mm! This is so good!” Guido gushed as he helped himself to more sauce. He genuinely looked to be enjoying himself, or at least Volf thought so too; he beamed a saccharine smile as he handed his older brother another skewer. Less dinner for Guido tonight—that much was certain. Jonas, though, found the sauce distracting; far from inedible, but it diminished the flavor of the very rare beef. Given his altered sense of taste, it was what it was.

Next up was the quick-cured green squid, as wide as two palms. A *monster*—calling it a squid was a misnomer. Like its color suggested, the creature was able

to use moderate air magic to leap out of the water's surface and avoid predators. Clever fishers would drive them together with boats, then catch them in nets. Though it didn't have much fishiness to it, its sickly green color and tough flesh had prevented it from finding popularity as a food item among the nobility. Somehow, the quick-cured example before Jonas's eyes was even less appetizing. It looked wrinkly and moldy, suggesting it was past the point of freshness, yet it had no foul odors to speak of. A mysterious creature indeed.

When their glasses ran dry, Rossetti switched them out for estervino and the appropriate vessels. "This should pair well with the squid," she said. She could handle her liquor for a lassie; the strong Eastern Kingdom drink had no visible effect on her. With a drink in her left hand, she grilled the skewer of squid with her right. It shrunk as it sizzled away, its mass turning into a smoky, savory scent.

Guido watched his little brother, without so much as a fork or knife, biting down into his green squid. "Hm, so that's how you do it," he muttered to himself as he discovered an ill-mannered way to eat. Guido tried imitating the bad behavior, but his small, delicate bites meant tugging at his prey instead of tearing it apart. Its elastic leg stretched, defying its predator one last time. If Countess Scalfarotto could see her son like this, she would give him a two-hour tongue-lashing after she regained consciousness.

Nonetheless, the sight of the older Scalfarotto brother enjoying himself was one to be cherished. Reconciling with his younger brother had brought out a side of Guido that hadn't resurfaced for a while—his eyes were bluer, his speech quicker, and his laughs louder whenever he spoke with Volf, almost as if Guido were a child again. His attendant was at a loss as to how to feel about it, but that his master had shed that burden was something to silently rejoice over.

Jonas's squid was finally cooked as well, and he promptly learned that it was surprisingly tender and briny, different from the kind of fare he was used to. The legs, however, were a little chewy, and biting down and trying to tear them off did little to help. It was then he saw Rossetti sinking her fangs into her skewer and rendering it into a bite-size piece with her front teeth. Was it polite and proper? Jonas struggled with the answer, but he was impressed with how deftly she had done it. She then followed it with a swig of the estervino,

washing it all down her delicate gullet.

Her sigh of satisfaction spurred Jonas to try the estervino too. It was a drink that he hadn't had much of before, and he could imagine it bringing out the fishiness in the aftertaste of the squid. But the slightly cloudy, hazy liquid subverted expectations too. Its sweet fragrance differed from the nose of wine and its thickness coated the tongue differently from liquors. The off-dry estervino appeased his red lizard tongue's thirst for blood. The others had already begun grilling bell peppers and parboiled carrots, but Jonas repeated a cycle of squid and estervino.

"Here, try some of this next," Volf said. "Not only does it go great with a drink, but it keeps well too."

"That's quite the unique appearance..." Guido eyed his skewer with doubt.

Jonas was infected with the same skepticism for the dried kraken legs in his hand. It was his first time seeing this tan-colored thing, and unlike jerky, it was bizarrely stiff. He couldn't help but contrast it with the kraken tape the Mages' Corps used. Was this really edible? Could the human body really digest it? Jonas was deadly serious.

"Um, I know it doesn't look tremendously appetizing, but those who like it love it grilled," Rossetti explained.

What that meant to Jonas was that the dried kraken was absolutely disgusting to others, and he bit his tongue to keep from quipping back. All things were worth a try. He was confident that he could keep it from coming back up if it were truly awful. Jonas placed the skewer on the compact magical stove, and the kraken began twisting and curling. Though it smelled pleasant enough, it was apparent that it wasn't getting any softer.

With a dry smile, Guido muttered to no one in particular, "What a curious thing."

The woman in front of him flipped her portion onto the other side. She began tearing the kraken apart, though her fingers could only hold on for so long before she had to let go again. She placed a small piece in her mouth and began gnawing on it. Beside her, Volf placed a larger piece in his mouth and did the same.

The two were totally in sync, and Jonas had to force himself not to smile. Instead, he fired himself up to try some of the kraken that had just finished grilling. At first, it was shockingly like chewing on string or rope. Flavor-wise, it wasn't too dissimilar from squid or octopus—briny, but only subtly so. Each bite reminded him more of the ocean. It had been long since he had tasted this flavor.

"It's surprisingly good..." With a piece of the leg in his mouth, Guido looked as though he were contemplating something while staring at the remainder of his food. For the next few moments, all was oddly quiet; everybody was too busy chewing on their dried kraken and sipping on estervino.

Volf extended him some more. "Have another one, Master Jonas."

"Thank you." He accepted the dried kraken, which came with a curious glance from his master.

"Jonas?" prompted Guido.

It wasn't a very elaborate answer, but it was all Jonas had. "It's good," he said. And it was the truth. The kraken was fresh, hot, smoky, and didn't have any odors to it. The texture—rubbery, in the best sense—was rewarding. And even though it wasn't meat still dripping with blood, there was flavor, and that made him feel human.

"Jonas, you don't need to force yourself—er, sorry, I should explain that Jonas's sense of taste is a little different." Guido had a troubled look as he explained the situation to the rest of the group. He was obviously worried about his attendant, even though Jonas had repeatedly said that different was not necessarily a negative thing.

"Worry not; it is not something I hide. Blights often alter our sense of taste. To use myself as an example, I cannot detect much flavor in tea or vegetables."

Rossetti followed up with a question. "Erm, does it give you trouble with eating or with food in general?"

"My diet is not the same as it once was, but that is merely a matter of adapting to the changes in my body. I can still taste alcohol and meat just fine, and today's meal has been just wonderful." Strong liquor and meat had been

more or less all that he considered food, but after today's experience, that list had expanded to include cured foods and estervino—a list that wasn't so bad in terms of staving off starvation. Or rather, it offered him plenty of delicious options.

"You should take that stove with you, Master Jonas," suggested Volf. "It'll be handy when you need a snack in the middle of the night. I'll get some cured seafood and estervino prepared for you as well."

"I am grateful to be in your care."

The eldest Scalfarotto brother must've enjoyed his time today as well. "Me too, Volf?"

"Of course!"

It was a tender moment between the brothers, but Jonas had another duty to fulfill. "As I am concerned for Lord Guido's health, I shall tend to your brother's stove as well, Lord Volf."

"Brother, are you unwell?"

Guido shot daggers Jonas's way. "I just need a bit more exercise, that's all. I'm sure a 'vigorous training session' with my best friend would solve that in a snap."

"Lord Guido...?" Seemed like Jonas had stirred up a hornet's nest.

When Jonas finished the glass of estervino in his hand, the redhead gently set a new bottle down in front of him. He thanked her, then, to be polite, made some small talk. "Madam Rossetti, do you encounter monsters often?"

"I wouldn't say I *encounter* them, but I do work with monsters and monster parts as a toolmaker," she replied. "Oh, but just the other day, I did see live slimes at the nursery."

"Oh, yes, I have heard about a slime farm situated outside of the city limits. How did you find it to be?"

"It was so very interesting with all the different types of slimes there." There was no hiding her excitement for the monsters; her bright green eyes had nary

a trace of anxiety or aversion—not even for the living half-monster in front of her eyes.

“You seem to have a deep interest in monsters,” he said. “May I, Lord Guido?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Would you care to see my possession, Madam Rossetti?”

“Are you sure? If it’s, um, something you don’t want to show others, I wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“It is no secret. Those close to me all know, and it isn’t something of which I am ashamed either. Lord Volf has seen it already as well,” said Jonas as he removed his jacket, rolled up his right sleeve, then removed his rose gold bracelet. Densely growing red scales appeared as soon as the misperception was lifted.

Rossetti, standing on the other side of the table, fixed her gaze on his right arm, but that was all she did. She did not shrink nor scream, but calmly observed—disappointing, really. “The shape and color of your scales resemble those of a fire dragon’s.” Her accurate identification, however, was shocking.

“Oh, are you familiar, Madam Rossetti?”

“Just from the ones I’ve seen in illustrated guides,” she said. “Those must be the same scales used in my bracelet, then.” She slipped it off her right hand, then pointed at the piece of red inlay on the inner surface. The magic resonated with that in Jonas’s right arm, catching his attention.

“That seems to be from a rather large specimen. Mine were from an immature dragon.”

“Did you slay a fire dragon?”

“It was Lord Guido who incapacitated it; I merely put it out of its misery at the end.”

“That’s still an amazing accomplishment between the two of you!” She couldn’t have kept her eyes from sparkling even if she had tried.

Volf, standing next to her, sported the same look, but with a tinge of what might be apprehension. “I’ve never really asked before, but does that mean you

two bear the title of Dragonslayer?”

“No, when we came across it, it was already on the verge of death,” explained Guido. “Some members of the royal family had passed by before us; as subjects, it wouldn’t have been right for us to usurp the title, and so we just kept quiet about it.”

“I see...”

“Oh, and of course, I shall keep quiet about it as well,” added Rossetti.

“Much obliged.” Though Guido had to softly let his brother down, it was still painfully obvious that he was thrilled to earn Volf’s respect.

“Are there fire dragons here in Ordine, Guido? The Beast Hunters haven’t seen one before,” Volf asked.

“I’ve heard that young ones sometimes flock to the islands in the south, but they also try to avoid people.” Guido’s voice was soft, almost as if to pacify Volf, who seemed to be ready to depart on a hunt for one at any moment.

“How about their scales? Do they ever come up at auction?”

“They’ll show up once or twice a year. However, those are not usually plucked from a slain dragon; rather, they’re shed scales gathered from their roosts, and so they don’t possess as much magic, or so I’ve heard,” he explained. “Are you looking for some?”

“That’s right. Dahlia has been meaning to craft a copy of the bracelet she has on right now, and so we have been gathering all the materials for it.”

Magic emanated from the gold bracelet on her dainty wrist. A high-quality product with all of those enchantments must run for at least thirty-five gold, if not more. Was Volf working so hard to collect the materials to make one for himself? Or was the broad, like the magical toolmaker she was, going to make a copy as a replacement? Better yet, since they were on such good terms, they should have a set of bracelets with matching gemstones on the outer surface.

But Guido’s voice interrupted the moment. “So, what to do, Jonas?”

“Though they may only be the size of a whelp’s, I could offer you some of my scales. Given that I am still half human, they may or may not be good as a

crafting material.”

Rossetti shook her head immediately. “Thank you, that’s very generous of you, but I couldn’t; taking them from your arm must be extremely painful.” She was different from the composed noblewomen he was used to seeing—the pained expression on her face incited the mischievousness in Jonas.

“My sense of pain has also been diminished, so it wouldn’t be a problem.” He dug his hand into the thick scales and ripped; six or so were sundered from his arm. The roots of the scales grew surprisingly deep, and tearing them so violently broke the skin, causing blood to seep out and dribble down his arm. Just as he’d said, it was no more painful than if they’d come from someone else’s arm. But there was fun to be had; he shot out a blast of magical energy from his body and turned the dark red pupil in his right eye long and thin. He thrust the fistful of red scales in Rossetti’s direction. “Here you are.”



“Wha—” Exactly as he’d expected, her eyes grew another size. It was only natural that she, too, would be afraid of someone who was blighted and grew scales. Many women would scream, and if they managed to stop themselves from doing so, they would find a reason to excuse themselves. Jonas was sure that the next time they met, she would only see a monster. “What did you do that for?! Look at you, you’re obviously in pain!”

“What for? Well, I, erm...” Her rebuke caught him by surprise, and he stumbled over his words.

“You could’ve at least gently plucked them one by one! There’s no way that didn’t hurt you...” For whatever reason, she looked as though she were about to cry.

Not only that, but Volf looked at *her* with concern. It was clear that he was learning how to fight because he wanted to protect the girl, and Jonas’s stunt had probably put him on full alert. Looked like there was more to teach his disciple.

“I assure you, Madam Rossetti, that it was not painful. I apologize that they may be somewhat dirty, but please have them if it would help you.”

“No, I should be the one apologizing. I’m sorry for losing my cool, and thank you.” Rossetti bowed deeply and accepted the scales, but her green eyes remained fixed on the bald patch on his arm. “Um, your arm...”

“The bleeding will stop momentarily.”

“So you did injure yourself, then! You’re going to stain your clothes like this too.” She retrieved a handkerchief from her small bag before circling around the table to reach him. Then, as if it were the obvious thing to do, she took his arm and bandaged up the bleeding spot.

Jonas hadn’t thought for a moment that she would dare touch him, and he stood there dumbfounded as she tended to him with her soft hands. The handkerchief, too pure and white, was nearly blinding to look at directly with his elongated and dilated pupil, and he reverted it back to normal.

“Thank you very much for putting up with my unreasonable request.” After Rossetti bound his wound in a panic, she frowned at the bandage, now dyed

crimson, and looked as though she would burst into tears at any moment. It seemed to him like she was the anxious, restless type.

“Thank you very much for tending to me as well. Please take solace in the fact that new scales will grow soon.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Even Volf worried for him.

The pair were such worrywarts. Jonas was a bodyguard and attendant to Guido, so it wasn’t as if any injury of his merited this kind of fretting in the first place. Afterwards, Volf and Rossetti strongly encouraged antiseptics, proper bandaging, a healing potion, a physician, and everything else under the sun, and it took a very long time for Jonas to convince them that it was all very unnecessary. It was slightly aggravating to see Guido sitting there smiling with only his eyes, feigning ignorance, and munching on his cured seafood skewer.

With the party over, Volf offered to take his friend back to her home. The black-haired man and the red-haired woman walked down the little path that connected the garden to the main building, their laughter trailing behind them.

Guido smiled softly as he watched them walk off. “Now, shall we compare our assessments before our guest comes around again? From my point of view, there’s nothing to suspect; she’s white. What say you, Jonas?”

“She’s white as can be, or maybe I should say red—what you see is what you get.”

“And how did you arrive at that conclusion?”

“She came alone without an attendant, she didn’t realize I was in the room until you pointed me out, and she didn’t mind me standing behind her. She didn’t take up your offer of a free lunch, and even after you said she might become a problem for Volf, she still partook in the tea and sweets without so much as a hint of doubt or caution—well, that may be because she had her bracelet.”

“True. She sure ate well too.” Guido made a good point. A young noblewoman would never gorge herself on sweets, then demolish more barbecue afterwards, at least not in the presence of men. Her lack of pretense

was refreshing.

Jonas decided to keep that opinion from Volf, however. “She didn’t bat an eye when I swiftly switched out her plate, nor did she notice the knife I was holding. She didn’t react to the sound of me drawing my sword. At first I thought that she might not have noticed, but later, she clearly heard me utter under my breath that you weren’t getting a full portion of dinner tonight. From these things, I’d say that the thought of needing to be on guard against us wasn’t even on her mind.”

The purpose of switching her plate and flashing the knife had been to test her reflexes; anyone who was a trained fighter or assassin would have reacted on instinct. But Rossetti? She just watched as though it were a prestidigitation performance.

“Hell, you had me worrying when you switched out our plates so quickly. I was about to leap out of my seat.”

“I’m the one who should have been worrying. I believe I’ve been cautioning you about your waistline, yet there you were gobbling down desserts and seafood,” said Jonas, only to receive laughter in response. He was going to put his foot down about giving Guido a smaller portion for dinner, but it’d just be laughed off again. Jonas prayed that he wouldn’t have to join his master for the aforementioned training sessions. He continued, “She also froze up when Lord Volf unleashed his intimidation, which means that she has no combat experience. She also did not seem guarded when she felt my magic. Long story short, I don’t think she’ll bring harm to Lord Volf or the Scalfarotto family, and she’s too scrupulous to fall for anything that’s too good to be true.”

Jonas had previously investigated the woman named Dahlia Rossetti but hadn’t been able to dig up any dirt on her. She had been an honors student, and after graduation proved to be a talented magical toolmaker. Nothing stood out in her personal history, save for her engagement having been broken off. However, her encounter with Volf marked a period of upheaval in her life. She had started her own company, gotten involved with the Zola Company, suddenly become purveyor for the Order of the Beast Hunters, and had even been appointed as their advisor—a dramatic change in a mere three months. Not even Guido could understand how it had come to be. Was some powerful

family backing her? Had someone assumed her identity? Was she taking orders? He had turned over every stone, and today was the culmination of his investigation.

As someone who'd had extensive training in the martial arts, Jonas had a good grasp on the capabilities of the people he met. He could tell how much combat experience or training others had had. However, those notions weren't even on the table when it came to this woman. She was notably tense but displayed no sense of vigilance. She wouldn't be a very good fighter even *if* she were trained, what with her frankly dull reflexes. She seemed to have no sense of danger, not even fear, when facing a half-monster such as Jonas. That wasn't to say she was totally fearless; she'd frozen up under Volf's intimidation, after all. Whether this was typical of female commoners in general, Jonas did not know. What he did know was that this Dahlia woman was naive and vulnerable, and that he empathized with Volf and his anxiety around her.

"I believe she is someone to be trusted," Guido began, "and I'd like to support Volf's close friend. I don't think father should find it a problem if I were to tell him. What do you think?"

"I agree. She's just a normal girl who doesn't know too much about noble proprieties. Well, I suppose she is anything but normal, though."

"Mm. She's a kind and courageous young lady."

"Yeah. I didn't expect her to wrap my scaly arm like that." Jonas strained a smile at his bandaged arm. She hadn't so much as flinched when she touched his cold hard scales. In fact, Rossetti had even used her fair, delicate fingers to gingerly place his bloody plucked scales in another handkerchief—this time aqua—and packaged them ever so neatly, as though they were a treasure dear to her heart. It was weird, if anything.

"And I didn't expect you to be so well-behaved when she touched your right arm."

"Whatever do you mean by that, Guido?" The conversation took a sharp turn, and Jonas side-eyed his friend. The knight and his guest had already disappeared into the distance, and the master and his attendant made their way to the pond. The wind ruffled the surface of the water for a moment, and

then all was still.

“You know I’d give you anything that you wish for, Jonas, but her, I respectfully ask you to leave alone.” Jonas was dumbstruck at Guido’s sudden gravity; he was such a doting brother—a terminal case, really. Just what was his master fretting over? The two had been the best of friends for so long; there was no way he didn’t know Jonas’s tastes, and this broad didn’t suit them at all.

“Come on. Not my cup of tea. I’m sure she’s sweet down to her blood, but forgive me for not having a sweet tooth,” the servant quipped back to his friend, who still had yet to look his way. Besides, there was yet another reason for him to keep his distance. “That flower is what my student is protecting with such vigilance. The only thing for me to do is watch it bloom from afar.”

Interlude: The Employee's Invitation to the After-Party

As Ivano sat in the extravagant parlor, he didn't hesitate to help himself to the aromatic sparkling wine poured for him in a fine crystal glass, though he lacked the composure to savor it fully.

Earlier today, he had suddenly been summoned to the castle, but when he got there, the only tasks that were waiting for him were to check over the ledgers and the content of the deliveries to the Mages' Corps, which included waterproof cloth and other trivial magical tools. It had only been then that everything clicked for him: he had been pulled aside so that Dahlia, at the invitation of Volf's brother Guido, would go alone to the Scalfarotto villa. Nothing should have happened to Dahlia, since Volf was there too, but her safety still weighed on Ivano's mind. He had decided that if he still could not get ahold of her by evening, he would check in with Volf, Gabriella, Forto of the Tailors' Guild, and then Grato of the Order of the Beast Hunters—in that order.

After settling himself down, Ivano had calmly set about his work at the castle and then, once everything was complete, left after a few hours. Waiting for him at his parked carriage had been the coachman with an invitation to the “after-party” sent by Guido. Given that Dahlia had gone already, what right had Ivano to decline? He had accepted the invitation on the spot and headed to the so-called headquarters of the Rossetti Trading Company, Volf's villa. He had been brought to the parlor and there he was now waiting.

To complement the undoubtedly very nice bottle of sparkling wine, there were an assortment of exceptional cheeses, smoked salmon with a beautiful glossy sheen, crackers with various toppings, and bite-size sandwiches cut to show off alluring cross sections. This was no fare for a mere tea party but a substantial dinner; Ivano *needed* to try at least one of everything, which meant, unfortunately, it would be another day before he tasted his darling wife's home cooking again.

Gluttony aside, though, it was also a matter of etiquette that a merchant partake in the food and drink when waiting at a noble's home; it symbolized that Ivano wasn't suspicious of Guido—so he had learned from Forto. It also helped that Ivano had on his protective bracelet hidden under his right sleeve and it wasn't reacting to anything.

When the servant filled Ivano's glass for the second time, the door swung open. "Terribly sorry to have kept you waiting," said a mild-mannered man in a soft voice as he walked in. He had cool silver hair and deep blue eyes. None of his features resembled Volf's, and he looked more like a bureaucrat than a knight. Lurking in his shadow was his rusty-haired attendant; even Ivano could tell he was more so Guido's bodyguard. Noticeably absent were Volf and Dahlia, however.

"Not at all. My name is Ivano Mercadante of the Rossetti Trading Company. I'm very honored to receive your invitation today."

"Very glad to have you, Mercadante. Need I introduce myself?"

"I'm well-acquainted with your name, Sir Guido Scalfarotto, marquis-in-waiting. I would like to express my gratitude for everything both you and your brother Sir Volfred have done for us."

After the round of greetings, Guido smiled and urged Ivano to take a seat. "Please feel free to call me by my first name; Volf and I are both Scalfarottos, after all."

"I shall do that, thank you very much. Please call me Ivano as well."

Guido beat Ivano to the punch. "If you're curious about Madam Rossetti, Volf has taken her home already. A wonderful lady, she is." Given his positive comment and with Volf by her side, there shouldn't be anything to worry about. Guido dismissed the server; then his attendant brought him a glass of the same sparkling wine that Ivano had been drinking. Guido loosened his necktie and sank into his seat, looking extremely carefree. "I know we're both busy men, so let me cut to the chase. And don't worry about etiquette and all that either; I won't fault you for it."

"Thank you for being so considerate; I shall take you up on your offer. As well, I thank you for all of your support behind the scenes."

“I haven’t done anything—Volf didn’t want me to.”

“I have heard through the grapevine that you introduced our little company to many people.”

“No, nothing of the sort.” Guido said, waving the notion away with his hand. “I offhandedly mentioned to the other guests at dinner that my brother had become a guarantor for the Rossetti Trading Company and that I would like to support them as well.”

“On behalf of the company, thank you very much.” There was no doubt that the recent influx of direct orders for the company’s magical tools, including the waterproof cloth, was thanks to this man. If a soon-to-be-marquis was going around and saying he’d like to support a certain business, other aristocrats would quietly follow suit; they wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of a marquis but would rather curry favor instead. Orlando & Co. must be sweating too.

“Well, Madam Rossetti has been looking out for Volf. Though, I have to say, my contribution is surely but a drop in the bucket, seeing you have the backing of Forto of the Tailors’, Augusto of the Adventurers’, Lord Grato, and Lord Gildo.” His choice to drop their roles and titles was nothing short of bragging about being on a first-name basis with the knight captain and the head treasurer. “Ah, did you find it strange that I addressed Lord Grato and Lord Gildo by their names, despite them being longtime marquis?”

His perception was deeply concerning; it was as though he had read Ivano’s mind. However, Guido’s blue eyes were marked with kindness, and as far as Ivano could tell, he didn’t seem one bit nervous or otherwise guarded. Guido explained, “Lord Grato and I both work in the same workplace, so it’s often that we see each other. Many of the men under my command in the Mages’ Corps have joint operations with the Beast Hunters. Besides, my grandmother’s family was a cadet branch of Lord Grato’s family, and because of that, the children of the first wife are all named in a similar fashion—my father’s name is Renato, mine Guido, and my brother’s Eraldo.”

“I see,” said Ivano, despite not seeing the resemblance at all. As a commoner, a practice like that just seemed so foreign. Their consanguinity was news to

him, though, and it was apparent that nobles' clans extended to include distant families.

"As for Lord Gildo, he has graciously accepted me as a friend, and we call each other by our first names." Gildo was the only name on the list that was a little dubious, but Ivano kept that to himself. Guido swirled the wine in his glass and continued, "Ivano, I'm asking you this just once: are you connected?"

"No, I'm not. The only strings connected to my back lead to Chairwoman Dahlia's fingers."

"Good, that's good to hear. There are rumors that the Rossetti Trading Company is hers in name, but that in reality, it is *your* company, you see."

"Mere rumors, I assure you. Both our products and our company are of our chairwoman's own making."

"It sounds like it's complete balderdash meant to lead people astray, then."

"That is exactly it, sir." Ivano had never thought that even people like himself and Dahlia would be targets; he couldn't imagine how many rumors the likes of Volf, Forto, or Grato had had to contend with up to this point. It wasn't as though these rumors bad-mouthing Dahlia circulated in public either—no one had so great a distaste for living as to make themselves an enemy to a marquis family.

"Is there anything that your company currently needs? I'm sure capital is not a problem, but perhaps there are problems to be solved?"

"There is one thing. I'm not so sure what to do about a noble guardian for Chairwoman Dahlia."

"Volf wouldn't be the best option, seeing how he's often away on expeditions and thus may be unavailable if something should happen," Guido said. "How about me? Only with Madam Rossetti's permission, of course."

"Personally, I would be deeply appreciative if that were to be the case."

"I'll talk to my brother; I'm sure he'll understand if I say I'll be his proxy. Could you propose it to Madam Rossetti? Let her know that I'm acting on Volf's behalf and that it's an apology for my rudeness today."

That caught Ivano's attention, but he decided to wait and ask Dahlia what act of rudeness Guido had committed today. "Very well, I shall do that. What would be appropriate to offer you in return?" Ivano asked. It was only a good idea that he offer *something*; owing multiple favors to a nobleman was a frightening thought, and he'd rather repay with all that he had.

"Hm, let's see. How about I ask something not of your company but of you personally?"

"If it is within my means." Was there something that he could provide that Guido couldn't get? Ivano doubted it.

"I ask that you protect the Rossetti Trading Company—or rather, Miss Dahlia herself. If there is ever anything beyond the scope of your abilities, let me know."

"Thank you. If such a thing should ever occur, I would be grateful to be able to call upon your help." *Protect Dahlia*—a promise Ivano had already made to Volf. Perhaps Volf had asked Guido to extract the same promise again, or perhaps the siblings were all too similar.

"By the way, I know that you've been looking out for Volf as well, so is there anything that you personally need? I'd like to think I can offer money or houses or what have you."

"If there is one thing I would like, it is information. I would be grateful if you could show me how to gather information, even if you taught me no more than the basics." That was the biggest challenge Ivano faced at the moment. Even with his relationships to other businesses and commoners, he wasn't able to draw water from the noble well. Forto, being a viscount, had been a decent enough source, but Ivano couldn't see into the marquis in the castle. He didn't expect Guido to give him everything he wanted to know, but he hoped for at least a hint as to how to gather his own intelligence.

"Not a problem. You don't have a subordinate you've been training, do you? Let me get someone who'll be a direct contact between the two of us. I'll tell them what I can tell you, you tell them what you can tell me."

"I would be blessed to have that point of communication, but I'm afraid I won't have anything of value to you..." Ivano's heart skipped a beat; he

wondered if he had asked for the favor in the wrong way—there was no way he could leak information on Dahlia or the company even if asked to.

“And I won’t ask you to divulge company secrets or development data or anything of the sort. Let’s see...” Guido mulled the matter over for a moment. “Maybe you could tell me about what Madam Rossetti likes to eat or drink so that I can make sure Volf goes bearing the right gifts. Perhaps her taste in operas or plays as well? Oh, and I’d love to know what sweets and desserts are popular with commoners.”

“Commoner desserts, you say?”

“That’s right. A while ago, I bought my daughter a candied apple from the downtown area and she loved it. My wife wasn’t so pleased about it, or at least not until I got her one as well; now it seems that they both love candied apples.” Guido smiled the proud smile of a father and a husband—finally, something he and Ivano had in common. “To return to the topic of information, though, here’s a little advance payment for you. The two letter-writers your company recently hired? The girl is tied to Jedda and the boy to Lord Gildo. Use them well.”

“Excuse me?”

“The Jedda girl should be a good pick to promote to employee. I’m not so sure about the boy, but if there’s anything you want to let Lord Gildo know, you can probably send messages indirectly through him.”

Ivano was caught off guard, and it took him a moment to process Guido’s words. With Gildo being a marquis, his agent was more or less untouchable. However, the Jeddas were viscounts too, and it was natural that they would exert their influence around the guild to get the information they wanted from the Rossetti Company. Ivano felt a little uneasy about the news, but there was a lesson to be had as well—he had been naive.

Guido added, “No strings leading back to Forto or Augusto, though. Just putting it out there.”

Ivano knew better than to joke about whether those strings couldn’t be cut by scissors or a knife. The first time he and Tailors’ Guildmaster Forto had shared a drink, the latter had served him wine that relaxed the lips. Apparently, it was

customary among nobles. They displayed their might, wealth, or influence when meeting merchants for the first time to be upfront about the power dynamics of the relationship, and about the fact that there may be times when pressure or support would come into play. So Forto had taught him, but Ivano wondered if the guildmaster had seen the irony in that. Thankfully, Guido seemed to have chosen the latter route, that of support.

“Now, there is something I should confess,” Guido began again. “I have had guards shadowing your lovely wife and children since the week your company became purveyors to the Beast Hunters.”

“What?” screeched Ivano in his moment of shock and confusion.

“On some days at noon, you’ll find an old man with a white beard in the diner near the guildhall. Speak to him if you wish to know more. I believe he used to work for the Merchants’ until his recent retirement, but now, I have him on a leash—er, perhaps that isn’t the best way to phrase it—he’s an informant.”

“An informant?” Ivano didn’t mean to parrot Guido’s words back to him.

Guido continued with a quizzical look. “That shouldn’t be so surprising. There are many out there who want to know more about the Rossetti Trading Company, and you’ll find them swarming around you.”

“What would they want with *me*?”

“Frankly speaking, Madam Rossetti is a hard woman to get hold of. She doesn’t attend tea parties or soirees, but more importantly, her back is well-guarded. It would be foolish to make a clumsy attempt at strong-arming her. Which is why, to get at the company, they will threaten you instead of her. And to get to you, they’ll threaten your family. And let’s be honest, how could you possibly say no when the lives of your wife and children are on the line?”

Ivano stood up and bowed deeply. “Thank you very much. I am most grateful for your protection. I have been ignorant and careless.” Even Forto had warned him about his personal safety—*always have your family travel by carriage, don’t eat or drink anywhere or anything without first thinking, don’t let your children play unsupervised, be wary of any friends old or new who suddenly appear in your life*, and so the list went on. Ivano had always kept his advice in mind, but he now realized he had underestimated the danger that nobles faced.

“Please, no need for that. It really is no big deal.”

“Erm, forgive my asking, then, but do you have people guarding Chairwoman Dahlia too?”

“No, I didn’t get anyone to do so,” said Guido. “Although I do have capable fighters as my coach drivers; you’re most defenseless when on the move, see.” That would explain why his drivers were all so burly; it wouldn’t strain credulity if they turned out to be incognito knights. Ivano politely kept quiet for a moment as he contemplated whether he should secretly have people protecting Dahlia as well. “Just in case, I’ll get you portraits of the security detail. Once your wife goes through the sketches as well, burn them. No need to speak to the team. I’ll get fresh faces from time to time so that others don’t catch on. I’ll contact you again whenever I switch them out.”

“From the bottom of my heart, thank you. But, um, about the cost of everything...”

“Don’t worry about it. Oh, but don’t think it’s foolproof either; it’s safest if you’re cautious of everything and everyone around you and your family.”

“I understand. However, at this rate, I’ll be compounding these debts I owe you.” The security detail and the information he received today must have come at a cost, and this debt was just waiting to be collected.

“Fine. I have one request I would like to make of you: swear right here and now that you will never betray Madam Rossetti or Volf.”

“That much is a given, sir.”

“A given, eh? I’ll take your word for it, then.” Guido should have by all means laughed at the lighthearted exchange, but for just a moment, he had a look of terrible forlornness.

Ivano didn’t know how to acknowledge it and neither did he know how to change the topic, leaving him to make peace with the silence. A drip of condensation rolled down the side of his glass and chilled his finger.

“I know you’re a busy man, Ivano, so I don’t want to keep you from your work for too long. I appreciate you finding time for me today. Next time, I ought to

have you and Madam Rossetti come together.”

“Thank you very much, Lord Guido, for your support and your teachings.”

Ivano was about to get up to leave, but Guido was apparently not quite as ready to say goodbye yet. “Just one more thing.” His blue eyes grew a shade deeper as he stared without blinking. The contents of the glass in his right hand started crackling, freezing. “If you do head down the path of betrayal, I hope that you hide well your beloved wife and daughters.”

Though Guido’s expression, voice, and tone were as normal as could be, Ivano felt like a frog caught in a snake’s glare, paralyzed in his seat. His head felt like it was being pushed under the water. It took a split second before the message registered in his head, but when it did, ice ran down his spine. He had thought Guido mild-mannered when he first walked in, but what a joke that seemed now.

Behind that soft voice and those offers of help was a puppet master. Extended in his right hand were shiny gold coins; against the back of Ivano’s neck was Guido’s left hand holding an icy blade. It was the first time he had met such a quintessential noble, such a ghastly man, the marquis-in-waiting Scalfarotto. It ought to have been a source of pride that one commoner merchant like Ivano should be threatened like so.

Ivano thought that as someone who had been by Gabriella’s side, he would’ve been used to this kind of hardship. However, the chance encounter with the knights’ intimidation at the castle a while ago didn’t measure up to the experience now—Ivano would have crumpled to his knees and let his forehead kiss the ground if it meant relief. But no, that wasn’t the right response.

Instead, he gritted his teeth with all his might, bringing out every ounce of obstinacy and willpower he had in order to meet Guido’s eyes. When the man looked back at him, Ivano turned the corners of his mouth upward and projected the confidence and calmness he didn’t have. *Just you wait. You may have this battle, but I’ll bring the fight to your doorstep one day.*

“Rest assured. I’m magically bound to it already,” said Ivano, suppressing his trembling and flashing a bright smile through nothing but true grit. “Until the day I die, I shall be Ivano Mercadante of the Rossetti Trading Company.”

The Bestiary and the Man-Made Magical Sword: Fifth Attempt—The Riving Blade

On the coach ride to the bookstore, Dahlia unfolded her aqua handkerchief on top of her lap. “Should I really have taken these scales from him...?” She unwrapped six lustrous red scales, all varying in size from about four to five centimeters long. Their streamlined shape was an identifying feature of scales from a dragon. Unlike a fish’s, these had the smooth texture of well-polished obsidian or chinaware. They felt hard and cool to the touch, yet a faint warmth from the magic emanated from them. The color gradated from a deep shade of red at its base, where it was still tacky from Jonas’s blood.

“I think so. Master Jonas voluntarily gave them to you, right?”

She understood what Volf was trying to say—that she needn’t worry—but that was easier said than done. “I guess so. I really ought to thank him properly for this. The way he tore them off and the bare patch on his arm must hurt so much...” Even though Jonas had claimed his sense of pain had dulled and it hadn’t shown on his face, red blood had trickled from the now-esquamulose spot on his arm. He hadn’t just plucked one scale at a time either, but had grabbed a handful and ripped; recalling that the dull, damp noise brought her incredible unease. Dahlia couldn’t help but worry that Jonas had merely put on a brave face.

“Like a thank-you present? I’m already planning to give him a compact magical stove and some cured food to go with it, so let me ask him if there’s anything else he’d like.”

“Please, and thank you. If it’s anything we can arrange for him, I’d like to give it to him as a gift.” Even if the scales just grew from his blighted body, they were still a crafting material. Once she got them appraised, she decided she would get Jonas a suitable gift in return. Of course, the monetary value could easily be compensated, but the pain was less so. “Volf, I’m thinking of getting these scales appraised so I can work with them, but I want to first make sure with you

that that's okay. Mr. Oswald would probably have a good idea of their value, so it'd probably be him."

"Sure thing. But just in case, don't bring my brother or Master Jonas's name up if you can help it."

"Right. Oh, that reminds me—I hadn't properly made introductions with Master Jonas, so I don't even know his full name." Dahlia should've asked then, but she'd been unable to think straight from the panic and the stress of the situation. She only knew his first name, as that was what Volf and Guido addressed him by, but she wanted to know so she could write a thank-you note for today.

"It's Jonas Goodwin. Randolph's apparently a distant relative, but since Jonas is from the Viscounty Goodwin, Randolph might not know who he is, so I'm told."

"Oh, I *have* heard that there are many noble families with the name Goodwin, but I wouldn't have expected that they were indeed related."

"Yeah, the story goes that three Goodwin brothers served the first king, so maybe that's why there are so many branches in that family," said Volf. That was the first time Dahlia had heard that story. It seemed that the Goodwin family had had a long history since the founding of the kingdom. "With the scales, you've collected all the materials that you need for the bracelet, haven't you?"

"Actually, I still haven't got my hands on a forest serpent heart—"

But before she could finish her explanation, Volf broke into a big smile. "You've got yourself one of those already. There's one getting prepped at the Adventurers' Guild with your name on it. I think it'll be ready in, oh, a week or so?"

"Wait. Did you hunt a forest serpent, Volf? Aren't they super dangerous?!"

"It's not like I did it all alone; one of 'em popped up while me and the squad were out clearing devil nettles, so we all had a hand in taking it down." Volf was making it sound like they happened to pick a flower while out for a stroll, and Dahlia wasn't convinced.

“If I recall correctly, forest serpents are incredibly uncommon and powerful monsters, aren’t they?”

“Sure. But us Beast Hunters come across them from time to time; it’s actually the second one we’ve seen this season,” he explained. “And don’t forget, we’re kinda tough too.” The nature of their work meant encountering these dangers, so Volf must have been used to it by now, as he didn’t seem to have found the forest serpent intimidating at all—a far cry from the impression she got from its entry in monster field guides.

“I get that the Beast Hunters are strong; I know that much just from looking at you, Volf...” Dahlia trailed off. “What are forest serpents like in the flesh?”

“They’ve got lots of fat. Taste like chicken. Surprisingly tender and tasty.”

“Huh?”

“The sauce you made went really well with it.”

“What.” *Hold on a tick.* Dahlia was pretty sure she was talking about forest serpents, the menacing monsters that mauled merchants and travelers along the highway, not some bunnies or deer that frolicked in the woods. “Is that, uh, normal? Eating forest serpents? You must be talking about little juvenile ones, right?”

“It was my first time trying it, but the one we fought wasn’t that big—only about three meters when it reared up. Must’ve been a juvenile one, like you said.”

Hold the heck on. Just how big were they? Dahlia couldn’t picture it in her mind. Three meters tall when it had reared up? Just how long was the damn thing? Butchering one must be as terrible as slaying it.

Volf continued, “We grilled it on our camp stoves, which nicely rendered out the fat, and with a splash of your barbecue sauce, it was really good. Everyone else loved it too.”

His cheerfulness struck her with apprehension. Had the knights resorted to eating the monster because of her company’s stoves? “Volf, is the squad facing financial hardship because of the camp stove purchase? Do you not have enough budget for enough food, so you’ve resorted to eating forest snakes?”

Please tell me honestly.”

“No! Of course not! We’ve got plenty of leeway in our budget and with our field rations, so don’t worry about that. But the boys said that the meat rejuvenates the body, so I gave it a try.”

“Huh. Did it work?”

“I’d like to think so. I felt less fatigued than usual when I got back to the capital.”

To Dahlia, forest serpents meant fangs, skin, and other materials, but she was only now learning that their flesh was wondrously useful as well. With the Order of Beast Hunters’ seal of approval, forest serpent meat might just be the next trend in the capital. “Getting back on track about the heart, how much should I pay the Order?”

“The captain said that it’s a present to our advisor and that he’ll be happy if you can put it to good use for your research.”

“I haven’t done anything to deserve a present like that...”

“As an advisor, you’re already a part of our order, or like a teacher to us. If it’s too big a present, think of it as payment for all the delicious sauce you made for us.”

“Really, Volf? Forest serpent heart for some barbecue sauce? What kind of fools do you take the Beast Hunters for?” And what kind of a crook would Dahlia be if she ripped them off like that? Plus, that was just a batch of sauce she had made for the stove demo. She’d never thought they’d bring it out to the field.

“Okay, how about you make us a barrel of the stuff next time? Payment in sauce. You know, you got a load of rave reviews for it?”

“Payment in sauce...? Fine. I’ll give it some thought.” Dahlia ought to ask the Adventurers’ Guild what was the going price for the forest serpent heart that she dearly wanted. She was very grateful to get this opportunity, but she ought to repay them in kind. It’d probably take a whole lot of barbecue sauce to cover the costs, so she decided to prepare a salt-based condiment and maybe a basil sauce as well. And an herb salt or a spice mix on top? In any case, making such a

big batch would be a headache in itself; perhaps it was a job better suited for a spice shop or a chef instead of a magical toolmaker; someone like her should focus on coming up with a tool that would be useful for them in the field.

Volf interrupted her deep thoughts. “Would you like some dried forest snake?”

“Like, jerky?”

“Yeah! The captain dehydrated all the leftover meat for us.” Dahlia knew Volf was a big fan of dried meats, but she wouldn’t have expected Captain Grato to be so into it too. Maybe the Beast Hunters were going through some sort of jerky phase.

“How does it taste?”

“I prefer it fresh, but it’s not bad. People have been experimenting with it too—grilling it, pounding it into a powder then drinking it, using it with spices to make soup and stuff at home. Apparently, drying the meat makes the revitalizing effects even more potent.”

“Is that right? Shall we grill it or use it for soup, then?”

“No, uh, I’m good without. That stuff doesn’t really sit well in my body.”

Volf bit his lip. He hid from Dahlia the fact that his nose had bled when he tried the stuff. That night after the expedition, the men had grilled the dried serpent in the barracks. The older guys had been fine as they ate, drank, and shot the breeze. However, the younger guys like himself and Randolph had had nosebleeds, likely from eating too much of the nutritious meat. Kirk had had it even worse—it had looked like a scene from a disaster with all the blood that shot out of him, and he’d had to lie down and sleep on the ground for the night. Poor kid. At least Dorino had learned from everyone else’s example—he had packed up half of his portion instead of chowing it all down like everyone else.

“I know I’m late in saying so, but I’m sorry for my brother’s actions today,” Volf said.

“It’s okay. He was just worried for your sake. It’s all in the past for me.”

“He didn’t say anything else rude, did he?”

“No, he didn’t. I’m fine, Volf.” All of the hurtful questions that Guido had asked had come right in the beginning, after which he had promptly apologized. Dahlia understood that he was concerned for Volf.

He gulped ever so quietly. “Dahlia, listen. I have no intention to ever stop being your friend or to stay away from you.” Volf, with his eyes of gold, looked straight into hers.

A burst of elation struck her, but so did Guido’s words. *You may become a spot of weakness to my brother*, he had said. And despite the bitterness that the words were coated in, Dahlia couldn’t refute him. Volf wouldn’t hesitate to stand up for his friends, even if it meant unleashing his intimidation like today or getting into a fight. She wanted to become stronger so she could protect herself, but she was powerless as she was currently. Even now that she’d become a chairwoman and the Beast Hunters’ advisor, every step felt like a leap into the unknown. But nevertheless, no matter how she struggled, she didn’t want to end her bond with Volf. She wanted to be by his side. She was sure of this.

It took a moment longer than she would’ve liked before she could respond, but when she finally did, she said, “Thank you. Me either, Volf.” Her words hardly encapsulated her feelings and her voice was hardly as determined as she felt. In spite of that, she replied with a smile.

“And, um, I’m also sorry for getting so heated and using my intimidation...”

“Well, you got heated for my sake. Nevertheless, I would appreciate it if you would refrain from doing so; my heart nearly stopped...” Not only had she been frozen in place, she’d felt as if she had been encased in ice. It had been so much worse than his last time too. As she shivered just thinking about it, she noticed Volf look away.

“Dahlia, um, do we need to stop for clothes—”

“Volf! I would love to just immediately head to the bookstore right now, as soon as possible, without any delay.” She spat out the sentence, cutting him off. “And if you so much as say another word, I will forever address you by ‘Lord Scalfarotto.’” Perhaps she would bury him in sand were he to bring up the topic

again.

“I’m so sorry...” The youth hung his head, never to look her in the eyes for the rest of the ride.

The coach pulled up in front of the bookstore and stopped. The black brick building, which extended three stories into the air, had a pair of guards—one holding a spear and the other a sword—flanking the open pair of gates. Dahlia thought the security at this place went a little overboard, but books were indeed still luxury goods here in the royal capital.

Block printing was the best they had, so mass printing was still out of reach with the current technology. Because of that, short books cost about a silver piece, while thick books and technical books ran for a gold, if not a gilt silver and change. These were expensive products, and large bookstores employed security teams to protect their investment.

When they alighted, Volf took her hand even more gently than usual; Dahlia accepted it as if there were nothing out of the ordinary. The two, predictably, weren’t going to address what had just happened, but Volf was the first to break the silence. “Say, Dahlia, is there, um, something in particular you’re looking for?”

“I’m hoping to find something on noble etiquette and on letter writing. Actually, Mr. Oswald recommended a book on etiquette and I placed an order for it already, so we’ll just have to pick it up. I’d also like a guide on the monsters in other countries.”

“Oh, I’d like to see that for myself as well.”

At the front desk by the entrance, Dahlia gave her order number to the clerk, who went to the back and retrieved the bag containing her book. It had already been paid for, meaning that all Dahlia needed to do was to check the contents of the order.

“Is it okay if I look around for a bit?” asked Volf.

“Of course. Is there anything you’re looking for on this floor?”

“To tell you the truth, I’ve never actually walked around a bookstore

before..." Volf gave a pained smile with his spectacles-adorned green eyes. It was obvious that with his natural looks and without the fairy glass, he wouldn't have had the chance to take his time and browse for books before.

"By all means." The busy first floor housed children's books, novels, practical manuals, and other books of the sort, and the two of them, wearing cotton gloves so they could handle the books, set out on the suggested path, which ran clockwise. "How did you manage to buy your books up until now?"

"Because they come around to the barracks to sell books, I'll tell them what kind of books I'm looking for and how many I want. I'll ask Dorino, Randolph, or the other guys to pick out books for me as well."

Getting a bespoke selection wasn't such a bad idea, but nothing could beat immersing yourself in the sea of books. Dahlia could see it in Volf. It was kinda cute the way he would move, stop, and scan everything with his eyes like an excitable boy. At the children's books corner, the two of them whispered about all the books they'd read as kids. When they got to the novels section, they picked up hot-off-the-press stories of adventure and of chivalry. Volf spent much time looking through travel memoirs, which tempted him to buy one that focused on domestic travel. As for Dahlia, she found a cookbook of recipes from Esterland and knew she had to have it.

After paying for their first floor selections, they went up to the second floor, where scholarly journals and technical books filled the shelves, many of which were about arms, armor, and magical tools.

"Doesn't seem like there's anything on magical swords..."

"Magical swords *are* quite rare, after all," reasoned Dahlia, though she felt sorry given how dejected Volf seemed to be. With how uncommon they were, it was hard to imagine anyone had collected enough information to fill a whole book. She decided that if she found something that had anything about magical swords, she would buy it without hesitation. With a few more books than before, Dahlia and Volf headed up the staircase once more.

The collection on the third floor included the most expensive tomes, such as dictionaries and illustrated reference books. All visitors had to register their names before entering. There were two employees, one male and one female,

standing by the doors to check belongings.

Volf removed his fairy glass spectacles and walked ahead of Dahlia to greet the man to the right of the door. They seemed to be well-acquainted, and the employee let them pass through.

“Um, Volf?” Dahlia fretted, wondering if she should at least put down her name.

“You’re good. Remember how I said the bookstore comes around the barracks sometimes? Well, he’s the one who swings by. All the books I have on magical swords and monsters were found by him.”

“Oh, I see. He must be knowledgeable.”

“Yeah, you bet. One time, Randolph longed for this novel from his homeland, and our guy had it delivered to him in moments. A more senior knight wanted books to give to his children, and he was very happy with the suggestions he got as well. Books on weapons, agriculture in foreign countries—you name it, he can get it for you.”

It sounded as though he was a total expert. Unlike in Dahlia’s previous world, there wasn’t a catalog or search system in this world so someone could get the exact books they were looking for. Having someone who knew so much about the world of books would be a godsend, and Dahlia thought that she would want to try requesting a book one day as well.

There was another anecdote that Volf had failed to mention to Dahlia. The employee’s top recommendation was for a large print book with not very many pages. The cover featured artwork of plants and monsters, but the illustrations on the inside were scintillating portraits of lovely ladies that showed a lot of skin. The employee also talked to many of the boys in the Order, got their preferences for breasts, behinds, or whatever else, and brought them each some light reading. Volf had made a few such purchases as well, but he’d sooner perish than bring that up to Dahlia.

“He must know a lot about books,” she said.

“Yep.” Volf left it at that, and hurried inside the room.

There was an air of magic inside the room, likely from magical tools or spellbooks. In the back was a glass case, which housed thick and undoubtedly heavy dictionaries and illustrated reference books. Leathers in dark shades of black, red, green, navy, gold, and silver bound pages of ivory-hued parchment. They were decorated with fine embroidery, gilding, vermeil, and gemstones, turning them from mere books into works of art. Right in the center was what they were looking for: a bestiary on monsters in foreign lands. Its black cover featured gold text and gold embroidery and was as thick as a volume of encyclopedias of Dahlia's old world.

Volf approached an employee standing behind the glass case and received permission to examine the bestiary. The employee placed the book on a nearby desk, then Volf and Dahlia, still with gloved hands, gently turned over its pages. The intricate illustrations had shockingly vivid coloring, and, fortunately, the text had been translated into Ordinato, so Dahlia had no problem reading it.

The duo found themselves stopped on an entry: the *alraune*—a monster that had so far been sighted only in the nation that neighbored Ordine. The top half had the appearance of a beautiful young woman with dark green hair, while the bottom was of a huge flower with crimson petals and green leaves. In its entry, it was said to be a subspecies of mandrake, and there was an account of it being able to cause auditory hallucinations. Astoundingly, the petals were said to be able to prevent hallucinations when used as an enchantment material. This was seemingly public knowledge in Ordine's neighbor. There were also explanations of how to breed and cultivate a variety of different monsters, proving once again why they were described as a land of herders. The unicorn, baphomet, kingsnake, *sköll*, *dullahan*—all of the other entries were just as finely detailed, the art just as colorful, and the content just as interesting.

Finally, Volf's voice interrupted her focus. "How much is this?" he asked the employee.

"Seven gold, sir."

Seven hundred thousand yen—that was no small sum. After all, a scribe had to reproduce all of the full color and elaborate illustrations by hand. The

content was extremely valuable too, and it was something that could be very useful to Dahlia. She figured she should consult Ivano before spending the company's development funding on something like this, but as she hemmed and hawed, Volf said he'd take it and swiftly made the purchase.

"It should make for good research when I'm on an expedition, since I never know what I'm gonna face out there. It's not like monsters know much about international borders, right?"

That was very much something a Beast Hunter would say, but he had a good point. Monsters roamed the lands as they pleased without a care for the man-made concept of borders. A long time ago, a hydra had begun wreaking havoc in the neighboring nation but had then brought its wake of destruction to Ordine. Though the Beast Hunters and the other orders had joined together and fought in unison against the monster, the casualties had been terrible. There was consequently a memorial constructed at the capital's cemetery for those who had fallen in the battle. Fresh flowers adorned that grave no matter the season.

"Where shall we deliver this book?"

"I'll take it home with me today," Volf said, answering the bookstore employee. The bestiary came with a fancy black box trimmed in gold, which was then wrapped up in a black cloth with a sheen. It was a literal treasure, but Volf casually grabbed it with one hand. "I don't really have that much personal space in the barracks and I leave for expeditions all the time, so I'm hoping maybe you could keep it at the tower?"

"Huh? But Volf, this is—"

"It'd be nice if it were helpful to you with your work. Plus, I come over all the time when I have days off anyway, so maybe we could read it together then." His words raced and his golden eyes flittered; this was obviously a premeditated crime. But even so, it made Dahlia very happy—yes, the book itself was exciting, but what she couldn't wait for was the chance to read it together with him.

"Okay, I'll keep it on the second floor, then." She would have to make room for this very precious item on the top shelf that was in her living room. She also

made a note to prepare gloves for it too, so they wouldn't ruin the book with their hands.

"Thanks!"

"No, thank *you*."

Their faces shared the same bright, warm smile, and the two of them left the bookstore behind.

Their next stop had been the weapon shop—the same place from which Volf had bought the shortswords previously. The shopkeeper with the white beard remembered her well, even though she had visited only the one time before today. He had asked Dahlia if the enchanting on the shortswords had gone well and laughed when she said not as well as she would've liked.

"Can't help it if you're new to it. Just like with blacksmithing, it takes a thousand blades for an apprentice to become seasoned," the old man had said in a chipper voice, bringing her father to her mind. This time, instead of the shortswords, the shopkeeper recommended she try her hand at a bigger item for practice, and so the duo had decided to follow his advice and go for a longsword suited for enchantments.

Dahlia had no eye for this sort of thing, so she had let Volf do the choosing. Their size was more or less standard, but the metal the sword was smithed from mattered. He had discussed with the shopkeeper whether they should go for something that was sharp and would stay sharp, something more robust, and whatnot. Dahlia, though, hadn't been able to keep up with their conversation.

While Volf was picking out the sword, the shopkeeper had conducted Dahlia to the other room, where she was shown an enchanted pair of women's shoes. It was an extra-durable pair done up for an adventurer, which had made Dahlia awfully curious. By the time she'd returned to the main room, Volf and the shopkeeper were already on a first-name basis—the former calling the latter Flores and the latter calling the former Volf, both without any titles or honorifics attached. It was shocking how quickly they'd managed to get so close and crack jokes with each other. Volf, Ivano, Marcello, and men in general seemed to get chummy with each other so naturally; Dahlia had felt just a tinge

of envy.

Back in the tower, Dahlia and Volf changed into overalls and got to work on the longsword. Between the development of the zephyricloth, the camp stove presentation, and expeditions, the duo hadn't been able to fit in magical sword crafting until now, and they were also gung ho because they were sure that they had perfected the recipe.

She outlined today's objective. "The plan this time is to cover the joints with two bidirectional layers of sealsilver."

"And we're using a proper longsword to boot!" exclaimed Volf, practically bouncing off the walls; Dahlia failed to contain her smile.

On top of her workbench were a longsword fastened with screws for easy enchanting and a small box containing sealsilver. The plain and affordable sword sported a black hilt, a silver guard, a light gray scabbard, and a shiny blade, currently unsharpened. There was nothing ostentatious about it; rather, it was an honest, heavy-duty longsword. Its weight was hard to handle for the likes of Dahlia, which made it all the more shocking that Volf could wield one in each hand on the battlefield. If she tried to do so—not that she could really hold it up anyway—the swords would be swinging her around instead. Dahlia had a newfound respect for her friend.

Once the lid came off the small metal box, which was just the right size to fit in her palms, the sealsilver within reacted to Dahlia's magic and wobbled; her stoicism masked her shock. Sealsilver was dubbed a special metal because of its unique ability to solidify after one applied magic to it, which also meant coursing it with a big bout of magic would turn the whole thing into a block, rendering it unusable. And, because of Dahlia's recent increase in power, her control was now less than perfect and her body sometimes discharged magic of its own accord. For today's experiment, she made a conscious effort to concentrate.

"Shall I keep the enchantments the same this time? Self-sharpening for the blade, a water crystal in the guard for self-cleaning, a wind crystal in the hilt for haste, weight reduction for the sheath, and hardening for the screws?" she asked Volf for confirmation.

“If it’s possible, could you swap out self-sharpening with fire magic on the blade?”

“And make it like Sir Grato’s Ash-Hand?” Dahlia had seen for herself the captain’s curious sword, which output an incredible amount of heat and magic, and knew it must’ve been powerful enough to roast monsters alive.

“Yeah, exactly. It was really good for making jerky—efficient *and* effective at dehydrating meat.” *Hm.* His words were befitting not of a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters but perhaps of a fisher, pleading for a tool for his fishing village.

“I think I can make it hot, but not *that* hot. Give me a second...” Dahlia grabbed a pencil and crunched some numbers in her notebook, double-checked her calculations to make sure the sword would be safe to handle, then allotted some buffer on top of that. “Okay, so it looks like I can safely give it three fire crystals. It should be enough to cook small fish or green squid, and I’ll give the sheath heat resistance as well, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course it is!” he said with a grin.

Dahlia laid down a layer of sheet metal treated with heat resistance, then placed the sword, which Volf had disassembled for her, on top of that. She began by enchanting the blade with fire magic, placing her right hand on the crystals and her left on the blade as the magic flowed through her. Instead of the usual full spectrum of colors, the light projected onto the blade as a narrow beam of red and orange. The warmth tingled her fingertips, but her own magic prevented her from being burned.

“Are you okay, Dahlia? It’s not burning you?” Volf couldn’t help but worry, even though she had explained it in advance.

Nonetheless, it was heartwarming how considerate he was. “I’m fine; it’s just a little warm,” she said, smiling as she progressed with the enchantment.

Before long, the blade took on a slight redness and its heat caused it to begin shimmering. The question was how effective it would be in the field. It would be handy if it could serve as a backup fuel source for his camp stove, but it likely didn’t have that much energy within. It may have been a good experiment, but it almost felt like a waste of a good sword. Dahlia thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to talk to Volf about looking into having a mage at the castle strip the

enchantment when the magic ran out.

Dahlia had some armored crab shell in stock and used it to give the scabbard heat resistance. As it said on the tin, armored crabs were two-meter-tall crabs that lived in rocky and sandy areas and had a tough armor-like shell. Its defensive layer was noted for its heat resistance, giving it invulnerability to incoming fire magic attacks; the bestiary entry also said that it was weak against ice magic.

“Is that shell from an armored crab? I didn’t know it was heat resistant. I thought all it was good for was hardening armor.”

“They’re also good for cookware—and perfect for making medicine that would otherwise react to metal vessels.” In her hands were fragments trimmed off of a bigger piece, and that much was plenty for the scabbard. “Have you hunted them before, Volf?”

“No, never. There’s never a severe enough outbreak to warrant a cull, and adventurers are the ones who usually take care of them in the winter since the cold makes them all sluggish. What I have done is seen and eaten them, though.” Armored crab was a delight; its flesh was succulent and the tomalley buttery, making it a highly sought-after seasonal item. It was said that no part of the monster was ever wasted, and Dahlia fully understood why.

Back on the topic at hand, Dahlia blasted the red and white powder with magic; that was to melt the shell, something required before using it in magical tools. It turned into a liquid-like substance, which then formed a film. She covered the inside of the sheath and then applied a layer of sealsilver on top. This was the method Oswald had described for facilitating composite enchantment. Cladding the connecting parts and making the enchantments directional prevented the different magics from repelling each other. It also required Dahlia to apply the sealsilver unidirectionally—the first application went outwards and the second inward, and then she used a fixing spell to make sure they adhered. Dahlia made sure to keep the shell and the sealsilver layers as thin as possible so that the sword would actually fit in the scabbard; the concern in the back of her mind was that if the clearance was too tight, then it might snag while drawing, which could be the difference between life or death.

Just as last time, she applied a water crystal to the guard for the self-cleaning function and an air crystal for haste. These enchantments, too, were covered in a layer of sealsilver for each direction, and Dahlia made sure it was a thicker layer—she was a little excited to see it wriggle around like a long silvery slime.

What was different from last time was the amount of magic used in the enchantments. The guard and the hilt needed dramatically more magic than Dahlia had expected, though she didn't know whether that was simply because it was a bigger sword or it was a result of the materials. She made sure to keep it under a certain threshold so that the weapon would be safe to handle, and if everything went smoothly, she could up the magic in the next iteration; Dahlia found a certain joy in the trial and error.

“Let me just give the blade a once-over before I let you assemble it again,” said Dahlia. She held her hand a few centimeters above the blade and felt the heat radiating from it; it was slightly too hot to touch with bare hands. She applied a little water, which sizzled as it slowly vaporized. “Should I fetch a piece of jerky from upstairs to test it out?”

“Here.” He retrieved a small pouch from his breast pocket; inside were crumbled bits of dried kraken.

That gave Dahlia pause. “Volf, just what the heck do you keep in your pockets?”

“What?” he called back defensively. “Emergency rations.” Volf eagerly placed a piece of it on the blade and the jerky immediately began curling up; squeaking soon followed. He grabbed it and offered half to Dahlia, and she accepted it with little gratitude—though she had to admit the kraken *was* tender and thoroughly warmed. “I think this is just perfect for grilling up a jerky snack.”

“Why did you seek out a sword for this task? What purpose does the camp stove serve anymore?” Dahlia was appalled that he would find any excuse to use a man-made magical sword. Speaking of which, though, she wondered how he'd been using the Lamenting Blade they'd created last time. It did little but release a trickle of water—although if that was enough to put a smile on his face, then more power to him.

“Well, it looks like everything’s fine, so I’m gonna put it back together.” With work gloves covering his hands, Volf speedily reassembled the longsword—he was so accustomed to the task, he seemed as though he could do it blindfolded. “The sword’s holding together, and water comes out of the guard just fine.” Water splashed out from the guard and covered both sides of the blade—a marked improvement from their previous attempt.

Volf continued, “I’ll go over there and give it a quick shakedown.” Moving towards the wall at the opposite side of the workbench, he gave the sword a hard swing. *Swoosh*—Dahlia hadn’t thought he would put that much effort into it, and she flinched. “Ooh, it’s fast. It should be good once I get used to it.”

“Oh, good. We’ll just have to wait and see how long the enchantment on the blade lasts.”

When he returned, Volf placed the sword on the workbench. The blade glowed a slight red, though once it was in the sheath, no one would be any the wiser. But then, just as Dahlia placed her hand on the workbench and was about to ask him how the sword felt, the heat-resistant metal began vibrating ever so slightly. “Huh?”

A closer inspection revealed that it was the sword that was shaking, bringing Dahlia bad memories of the Creeping Blade. And then she perked up her ears—a faint chirping. Was it the sword? She looked at Volf and he looked back, and then the two of them stared silently at it in wonder. It was then that the shaking intensified and the sword began ringing.

“That doesn’t seem good; I’m going to take it apart!” said Dahlia.

“No, it’s too dangerous! I’ll do it!”

As the two panicked, the sword began to terrify them even more: the noise turned to one of creaking and groaning. Volf flung her backwards by her seat as he slid in front of her. Suddenly—*prang!*

“Volf! Are you okay?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It split at the seams, but nothing blew up.”

There the sword lay with its sealsilver layers flayed and its parts scattered across the table. Even the scabbard was in shambles.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know it would self-destruct like that...” Her math had said it would be fine, so how had it happened? The sealsilver was from the usual store and it hadn’t deteriorated. It couldn’t have been too much magic for the sealsilver to contain, especially since Oswald had given his approval. The application had been done properly, and she had made sure to coat every enchanted surface. Did that mean the two directional layers weren’t enough? Perhaps sealsilver was weaker with two layers in opposing directions, so it had messed up her calculation? Dahlia knew she needed to study this some more, but it wasn’t exactly possible to go up to Oswald and tell him, “So, I’ve been making magical swords...” The other possibility was that she’d put in more magic than she realized, but that was unlikely seeing that she wasn’t near the limits of her mana.

In any case, this experiment had concluded with a surprising result. There was supposed to be a way to contain powerful magic via materials with high magic resistance, but that was beyond her at the moment. Dahlia reckoned she’d begin work on the next man-made magical sword by hunting for materials.

“Gotta make sure the magic levels on the... Then make sure the difference there is...”

As Dahlia thought aloud, Volf joined in on the muttering. “You’d rather be in pieces, huh? I guess you guys must’ve hated the idea of being reincarnated as a sword...”

“Volf, let’s not anthropomorphize the sword.” She’d rather not believe the terrifying notion that any part of the sword had free will.

The Creeping Blade moving around had been enough to scare her, and thankfully, the magic in that hadn’t been too strong. That time, Volf had said that the only ghosts that would be present would be her family’s, but just thinking about her father or her ancestors haunting her tools had struck her with terror. Man-made magical swords were just magical tools, and the one laying there in front of her eyes was just a disassembled sword. Despite the strange noises and its spontaneous disassembly, there was absolutely, positively no way that it was haunted. Nuh-uh. None at all.

Dahlia looked at the parts on the workbench. “I suppose we can’t name it this time.” It had remained a sword for mere moments, and so surely, it would be too difficult to give it a name.

“You went through too much to *not* give it a name...”

“What are we going to name something that couldn’t even stay in one piece? The ‘Sword of Tatters?’ The ‘Unassembling Sword?’”

“Wh-Why would you say something so cruel...?” For whatever reason, Volf reeled back, aghast and offended at what she honestly thought were fitting names. “No. This must be the ‘Riving Blade.’”

Dahlia squinted in disbelief. She knew her taste in naming wasn’t great, but it *had* to be better than his. “Isn’t that a little strange, Volf? I mean, it was barely a magical sword, and the only thing it rived was itself...”

“No. It needs pizzazz. It needs to be...romantic.”

“Pray tell, why would that be necessary at all?”

“Dahlia, you just don’t get it, do you? You don’t.” Volf huffed. She figured it was a losing battle, and rather than engaging further, she decided to flick around the glass spoon she used for scooping out sealsilver. Now it was Volf’s turn to squint at her. “Now, there’s no need to be throwing around your spoon, is there?”

“I just find the so-called romance hard to understand. I guess.”

“Well, then, let me explain.”

“I don’t think anyone but you needs to know.”

“What? No! I want you to understand—no, *you* need to understand! Let me start from square one!”

“Thank you, but no thanks!”

Today was the day Dahlia learned that not everything about herself and Volf blended so harmoniously.

Interlude: The Employee's Offer for Subcontracting

After Ivano got out of the carriage, a quick scan of his surroundings told him all he needed to know. Although it was slightly before noon, there were no couriers running around with cargo, no foot traffic from customers or clients, no signs of life at Orlando & Co.—a far cry from the previous time he was here.

As he approached the entrance, he saw a woman loitering around and peering into the windows. Her profile was a familiar one, one that he'd seen many times at the Merchants' Guild in the past—she was the missus of the former chairman and mother to Ireneo and Tobias. Even from the side, she looked as though she'd aged awfully quick. Ivano remembered her as someone who, despite being in her fifties, had glossy, supple brown hair and a full, round face, a vestige of the glamor she'd enjoyed when she was younger. Now, though, she was clothed in a baggy dress and her graying hair was tied up in a bun, her haggardness front and center.

"Very good to see you again, Madam Orlando."

"Oh, if it isn't Ivano. It's been too long," she greeted him in return with a slight startle. That was only natural, as Ivano hardly looked as he had before, if he did say so himself.

Back when he was still an employee of the Merchants', he had dressed much more casually so as to move cargo. Now, though, there was a tightly woven ivory shirt under his dark navy three-piece, and his brushed mustard hair was grown out to accentuate its waviness; he was grateful to have the Tailors' Guildmaster Forto's recommendation for a stylist and Oswald's recommendation for a barber. Though clothes may make the man, he was confident in his new presentation too, even if he couldn't have said so on the first day after his makeover. He had writhed in front of the mirror that day, but "You look so cool, papa!" his wife and two daughters had shouted, and he had learned to love his new style. Ivano was a simple man.

"You've grown to be such a splendid young man, Ivano; Madam Gabriella

must be so happy.” Only Old Lady Orlando would bring up not his wife or parents but Gabriella.

“I wonder. With how busy I have been as of late, the vice-guildmaster and I haven’t had the time to chat.” Ivano smiled, fishing for a response.

The bite came after a beat. “How has everything been?”

“Well, I’m as you can see. Unless you were referring to someone else?” Ivano knew full well she was asking about Dahlia, but he made sure his navy eyes didn’t show it.

“She would be having herself a good laugh if she could see how our company is now, that young lady.”

“Hah! I should like to think our chairwoman is better than that.” In response to her regretful tone, he deliberately hammed up his laugh, only for the conversation to die there. “Anyway, I’m here for a meeting today, and hopefully it will be a long-lasting deal. Would you be able to show me in?”

“Oh, forgive me. Right this way.” As if she were looking for an excuse to do so, she led him across the threshold.

“My name is Mercadante, and I’m here on behalf of the Rossetti Trading Company.”

“Thank you very much for coming by, Mr. Mercadante. Ireneo will be with you shortly. Allow me to show you to the drawing room first,” said the employee, who seemed to have been waiting idly. “Um, Mrs. Orlando—”

“It’s no bother at all; I would be very glad to have Madam Orlando join us today.” Ivano’s words did little to assuage the employee’s concern, but the man led the two of them to the drawing room.

It was the third time that Ivano had come here on behalf of the Rossetti Trading Company to talk to Ireneo, pick up materials, and the like. Because Guido had promoted their company at a dinner party, they’d had a boom in orders for waterproof cloth and other magical tools. On the other side of the coin, sales must’ve dwindled for Orlando & Co. After all, not only was the company promoted by the marquis-in-waiting run by his brother’s lady friend,

but that lady friend had had her engagement broken off by Orlando & Co.'s manager of magical tools for selfish reasons—it was only a natural outcome that the company should suffer. However, neither Dahlia nor Guido knew about the moral grays Ivano had also committed.

For eighteen days after the camp stove presentation, Ivano had hired gossip-birds to spread word about the dire straits the Order of Beast Hunters were in. Many fell in battle against terrible monsters, many more suffered injuries, they were saddled with dreadful conditions and field rations, they were often parted from their loved ones, all to protect the citizens of the nation—so Ivano had made it known in common drinking establishments. The grim tales of the brave putting their lives on the line were just the right accompaniment for a working man's fourth or fifth drink, and the gossip-birds seemed to have liked the tunes they were chirping as well.

The Beast Hunters had always been a favorite of the masses, and in short order, the embellished stories made their way back to Ivano's ears. Then, at the same bars and taverns, he had gradually sowed whispers of the camp stove: how the chairwoman had wanted to lend the little power she had to the Beast Hunters, how she had shaved her profit margins in exchange for a single humble request—the honor of putting her name on the bottom of the stoves—how Captain Grato had paid homage to her and asked her to be their advisor, and other stories in praise of Dahlia. It had all been part of the plan. The patrons, with the tragic Beast Hunters still fresh in their minds, had lapped the stories up and shared them without any prompting.

Now, this talk contained no lies or exaggerations; it was verifiably nothing but the truth. But tales of the chairwoman of the Rossetti Company—so dramatic and interesting, they should be in an opera—slickly sneaked their way into the collective mind of the people. It wasn't long before people stopped mentioning her broken engagement or that she was under Volf's protection. Instead, Dahlia was rumored to be a valiant woman who supported him with her own work, despite their difference in societal standing. That wasn't Ivano's doing either; it was how things took their course—or perhaps some noble may have pulled a few strings. Not to say he wasn't curious, but there was no point in bringing unnecessary trouble upon himself, so he wasn't about to look into it either.

Plus, although Dahlia was convinced that she had forced Ivano to give in to her demands to make the camp stove cheaper for the Beast Hunters, nothing could be further from the truth. When she'd said to stamp the Rossetti name on the bottom of their stoves so that it would be good advertising, it had sent shivers down Ivano's spine—it was then he'd known her vivid imagination reached beyond just magical tools. He wanted nothing to slow the impetus of a gifted mind like that.

Along with some tea, the employee brought the chairman of the company. "Forgive me for keeping you waiting."

"Not at all. It was I who arrived earlier than our appointment." Ivano hadn't; it was Ireneo who was a tad late.

The rings around his eyes were darker and his face was paler than the last time. "Now then, about—"

His mother interrupted him. "Ivano, is there a way we can apologize so that Lord Scalfarotto will ease up on us?"

"As far as I know, neither Sir Volf nor Lord Guido has done or is doing anything to Orlando & Co."

"But with how things are now..."

"Mother, be quiet." Ireneo couldn't contain himself; he'd likely wanted to shut her up earlier, but he must still have been off guard, having been caught by surprise when his mother appeared in the room. "I apologize, Mr. Mercadante."

"No, it's fine. I would like to clear the air as well. Lord Guido told me that Sir Volfred had prevented him from acting against your company."

"Are you and Lord Scalfarotto on speaking terms, Ivano?" asked Madam Orlando.

"Yes, and in fact, he invited me for a drink the other day." None of it was strictly false. It may have been the *first* time they had spoken with each other, but they also now had a private messenger between them. He knew there was no escaping Guido, but the name Ivano Mercadante must mean something to have earned a sword hanging above his head. And that being the case, Ivano

may as well use the name Guido Scalfarotto to his advantage. “Back on topic, though, would you happen to have spare hands?”

“Quite a few as of late, actually,” said Ireneo.

“I have much magical toolmaking work to share.”

“I would be grateful to accept all that we can.” Ireneo accepted without needing to make time or ask for terms; business must have been even worse than Ivano had imagined.

Ivano pretended as if he didn’t notice the veins bulging in the backs of Ireneo’s hands as he poured him tea. *Good leaves, but tepid.* Ivano glanced at his ring; it had already become a habit to check for poison.

“What about Dahlia?” Madam Orlando asked.

“What about our chairwoman?”

“Did Dahlia give permission to off-load work onto us out of spite?” She seemed as though she couldn’t help asking.

Ivano smirked. “The word doesn’t even exist in her vocabulary. Our chairwoman is too busy with the castle and various guilds, not to mention her fulfilling private life. *Spite!* Oh, that’s rich.” He was keenly aware how belittling his sneer was, and how wicked his face, but he had no intentions of acting otherwise. “Quite frankly, I doubt she gives much thought if any at all to Tobias, the Orlandos, or Orlando & Co.”

Forgive me, Carlo, Ivano thought; *I know I’m in no way Dahlia’s father figure, and I could never, ever replace you in her life.* The way Tobias had called off the engagement had pissed Ivano right off, though he could no longer say whether that was because he had daughters of his own, because he and Carlo had gone back a long way, or because he had learned just what kind of person Dahlia was since he began working with her.

“She instructed me to treat Orlando & Co. the same way we would any other company, but believe me when I say I have tried suggesting otherwise,” continued Ivano. “The chairwoman, having been raised properly, wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Whichever way he took that, Ireneo growled Ivano's name. "Mr. Mercadante..."

But the one Ivano was looking at wasn't Ireneo; it was Madam Orlando. It had been Carlo who had raised Dahlia, but who had raised Tobias, the one who had broken off the engagement with Dahlia? Answering the question between the lines, Madam Orlando cast her gaze to the ground and spoke. "When Tobias told me that he wanted to break off the engagement, I gave him my approval on the spot. I could see that Tobias and Dahlia weren't together because they had feelings for each other, and I wanted him to find love. And I thought Emilia would be good for the company too—that selfishness played no small part..." How the tables had turned—they had traded a woman who had now earned her barony with her own two hands for a woman who may have earned the ire of a viscounty. "I should have reprimanded Tobias or, at the very least, have thought things through better. I should have protected Dahlia like my own daughter, but I sacrificed her instead. I bear much responsibility for the way things are now, and for that, I deeply apologize..." Her wretched repentance conjured no response from Ivano; rather, he had no right to comment on this matter—not that he wanted to anyway.

"Ivano, thank you very much for coming today. If you could, please apologize to Chairwoman Rossetti on my behalf. I pray that the company sees nothing but success and prosperity hereafter," Madam Orlando said in an oddly soft voice. When Ivano met her gaze, he thought there was something terribly wrong about the color of her eyes. As though to confirm that, she continued, "Sorry for butting in, Ireneo. I'll do as you have said and never show up at the company again. I pray that business goes smoothly from here on out..." She looked at her son and smiled before deeply bowing once and leaving the room.

"Mr. Mercadante, I apologize again for the embarrassment—"

But this was no time for apologies. "Chairman Orlando, please go after her right now and have someone follow her. Your mother, she had the same look in her eyes that my father did right before he passed. I might be presumptuous in saying this, but I think it would be best if you don't leave her alone for the time being."

"Excuse me!" Ireneo must have forgotten his cool, and he bolted out of the

room.

Ivano, now alone in the room, took a deep breath and let out a heavy sigh. He didn't hesitate to empty the pot of black tea into his cup. Steeped too long and astringent it was, yet the burnt umber liquid helped soothe his mind—not that there was any getting accustomed to that color in the old woman's eyes.

By the time Ireneo returned, it was a quarter hour later. "Forgive me, Mr. Mercadante, and thank you very much," he said, offering a deep, earnest bow. Whether Ivano's word of warning had been on the mark was yet to be seen; neither of them mentioned the matter further.

Instead, Ivano chose to change topics, extracting some documents from his briefcase and laying them out on the table. The other man, though, had something else in mind.

"Mr. Mercadante," Ireneo continued, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"If there are any employees of ours who have caught your eye, please let me know."

"You would have me poach them?"

"As chairman of my company, it wouldn't be right for me to explicitly ask for it. Before I'm forced to lay off our workers, I'm sure there would be someone who could make for a good subordinate for you. It would spare them from the indignity of being dismissed as well." The knuckles of Ireneo's clenched fists were white; perhaps Ivano's father's had been the same when he'd resigned himself to the fate of the family business.

"Let's both lay our cards on the table." Ivano stuffed his index finger under his collar and pulled, loosening his necktie. "We could really use talent. How many people are you looking at, and on what time frame?"

"A fourth of our workforce in four months."

"Chairman Orlando, you understand that would be a blunder?"

"I do."

“If we were to take a quarter of your people, in two years—no, one and a half, we would be able to swallow your company whole.” The numbers in Ivano’s head said that if even half of that quarter turned out to be promising workers, the Rossetti Company would be able to take Orlando’s clients.

“Still, that would be a year and a half more that we live.” Strained as his voice may have been, it was still that of a chairman, that of a superior—one that was shockingly similar to the former chairman’s.

“Do you wish to survive in the hopes of recovery? It shan’t be easy.”

“It would be more time to protect those working for our company.” Ireneo’s decisiveness was reassuring. At the very least, he seemed to respect his workers instead of treating them as disposable, as mere numbers. “And you, Mr. Mercadante...? What do you wish for?”

Ivano answered Ireneo’s wavering question with full frankness. “Freedom. Freedom for our chairwoman to pursue her own interests, freedom for me to conduct business—freedom from those who intend to interfere with us.” He did not wish for the destruction of Orlando & Co.; that would not be in the interest of the Rossetti Trading Company. If something could be of use, then let it be of use; turn the troubled past into an investment for the future. Dahlia would accumulate smiles with her magical tools and he would accumulate trust and gold so that the company might stand tall. For that to happen, though, they needed people who could be of use. “Chairman Orlando, I ask for your whole workforce.”

“Excuse me?”

“The entirety of Orlando & Co. shall subcontract for us, putting our work as top priority. None would dare to make an attempt on you while under the umbrella of the Rossetti Trading Company. We shall lay the groundwork to make it so. Though your operations may shrink, others will not be able to put your company out of business. We shall endeavor to prevent them from meddling with you.”

“But wouldn’t Miss Dahlia—er, Chairwoman Rossetti become the target of, um, unsavory comments?”

“Still playing the part of the watchful brother-in-law, are you?” Ivano laughed

in his face—deliberately, of course. “Ever since the end of her engagement, our chairwoman has taken all sorts of comments in stride, never showing a smidgen of pain or even care. Besides, that’s *if* anyone can stand up tall and say these things to the world now.”

If anyone had the guts to say this was an act of revenge or punishment for breaking the engagement, Ivano would like to see them try. Dahlia was the chairwoman of a company with official purveyor status to the Order of Beast Hunters, an advisor to the same group, and had made baroness in a year. Not only was she in *Marquis* Grato’s favor, she was a brilliant magical toolmaker inventing breakthrough after breakthrough. She had glowing recommendations from various guilds. Who would want to make an enemy of her? Besides, it didn’t matter if the attacks came to her face or from the shadows; Ivano Mercadante was going to plow through the naysayers.

“Very well. I would like to hear your terms,” said Ireneo.

“‘Subcontractor’ doesn’t give off the best of impressions, so shall we call it a business alliance? In any case, there is a great deal of work we would like to entrust to you, so we will give you as much as we can. We shall go through our connections to protect you where we can. If there is anything wrong, we shall be happy to help. In exchange, however, I ask the two of you to go to the temple and enter a magical contract, promising that you will never do anything that could harm Ms. Dahlia or the Rossetti Trading Company.”

“The two of us, you say?”

“Namely Chairman Orlando—you—and your company’s manager of magical tools—Tobias. Oh, and, of course, we shall cover the fees to be incurred. Please take seventy-two hours to consider, starting now.” Ivano’s expression showed that he wasn’t about to concede on the terms, not that his peremptory way of speaking allowed Ireneo to get a word in anyway.

“So, you would say you take after your grandfather, Mr. Ivano?” Dark and glum, Ireneo rehashed his question from their last conversation.

“No,” Ivano responded immediately. It had taken all of Ivano’s resolve to maintain his expression the last time he’d confronted that question, but those barbs no longer pricked him. His grandfather, who’d founded the family

business, had been criticized for being all too shrewd a businessman. His father had been respected as a kind man of integrity but had led the company to its ruin. To Ivano, now clad in mercantile armor, they were simply memories of the past—he was his own man and his own merchant. “I have been introspective lately, and I realized I take after neither my father nor my grandfather.”

“I see...” Ireneo’s black pupils pinned the floor. He had nothing more to say.

“Would you call me Ivano from now on, Ireneo?” By doing away with honorifics and titles, he made it clear that it was merely a rhetorical question. It was odd, if not wrong, that an employee like himself would do so to the chairman of another company. Nonetheless, it was all a mere pretext. Although addressing one another by their first names implied familiarity, the two men were no longer equals—

Was it antipathy? Resignation? Whatever that flash in his black eyes was, for the sake of protecting his people, his only choice was to bend his knee and accept the extended hand. “I would be most grateful to do so, Ivano.”

—Ireneo was his match no longer.

The Present and the Professor's Wisdom

“Hmm... Now, what do I do with this?” Dahlia, with another filing drawer in her hands, was at a loss for where to put it. The room the Rossetti Trading Company had been renting for their office space must've shrunk, or at least it felt very much that way. Every shelf was buried under bundles of papers; every box had stacks of books on its lid, like pickling weights squishing down vegetables in brine. Dahlia lamented that she could neither summon a computer and a scanner to this world nor did she have materials powerful enough to create them.

The Rossetti Trading Company had been renting a warehouse for a while now, meaning that they didn't have to deliver orders themselves. Thankfully, they didn't need all that much storage space given how quickly products flew off the shelf, though inventory management must've been a headache in its own right with the number that came and went.

Dahlia had heard from Ivano that he had found a few viable business partners, and he had been dealing with that side of things by himself. Orlando & Co. was apparently one of them, but she hadn't heard much about the details, as Ivano had quickly moved on to speaking about another company. He was likely trying to be considerate and avoid talking too much about them, but regardless, everything between her and the Orlandos was in the past.

What was surprising was that Ivano had said that he'd like to take more time recruiting before hiring. “We'll be dealing with the castle and nobility a lot more from now on, so we ought to find someone who we can trust. It'll likely be a little more expensive this way, but let's stick to using the support staff from the guild,” he had said, convincing her. Right now, they had two clerks helping the company out. They seemed to deliver letters and documents, though Dahlia didn't know for sure, as she had never spoken to either of them at length. She was happy with whatever, just as long as it made Ivano's job easier.

Ivano also proposed that Guido stand in for Volf—since he was often away for

expeditions—as her noble guardian. After she got Volf’s thumbs-up and gave it some thought, she gratefully accepted the proposal. Now that she’d received Jonas’s scales and Guido’s protection, Dahlia asked Volf to see what would be appropriate to offer in return. Volf had already sent them a smorgasbord of dried and cured foods, which they absolutely loved. However, Dahlia was reminded of her visit to the villa and worried that Guido would be grilling indoors again, but she kept it to herself this time.

There was one more thing. Dahlia asked Ivano about Gildo’s offer to be her noble guardian. Apparently, it was a “you’d best get one sooner rather than later” sort of warning, but he would’ve gladly done so if she had asked. After all, Gildo was a man with a big heart, but he was always too many steps ahead. He was obstinate or even secretive in his way of doing things, and Dahlia couldn’t help but feel things would be a lot easier for him if he were more honest about his feelings.

When vice-guildmaster Gabriella heard about his offer, she scrambled to write him a letter thanking him and apologizing to him, and along with it, a pair of camp stoves and ten zephyricloth scarves. However, the next day, just when Dahlia thought she could take a breath, she found herself receiving a foreign-made red baphomet rug, fancy green tea, adorable flower-patterned fine confectionery, and an elegant thank-you note, all delivered to her tower. Gildo truly was blisteringly quick with his attentiveness.

And so, as her tummy churned, Dahlia wrote a thank-you note for his thank-you delivery. Even flustered as she was, the tea and candy really were yummy.

“Hey, how’s it going? I hope I’m not bothering you guys by coming a little early.”

It was Ivano who responded to the knock at the door. “Not at all, Sir Volf. Good to see you again. We don’t have guests or clients today, so come in and relax.” It had been a few days since Volf had had the opportunity to take time off work, so he and Dahlia had made plans to have dinner together. “Ms. Dahlia, Sir Volf is here early. I’ve already finished checking the ledgers, so why don’t you head on out earlier today?”

“Sure, right after you, Ivano.”

“Oh, I just have a few more documents to go through...”

“I’ll join you, then.” Dahlia knew full well he would be working more anyway after he got home, so she kept an eye on him while she could. Just the other week, Gabriella had fabricated a story about how the room had a closing time to send Ivano packing, and that was after he’d already told Dahlia that he would be “going home soon.” Dahlia knew better than to let her guard down now. She wasn’t about to let her beloved employee die of excessive overtime like she had in her previous life.

“Very well. I’ll just file these documents in trays, store them in the cabinets, then go home.”

“All right, that shouldn’t take long. The three of us will leave all together, then, Ivano,” Volf chimed in. It seemed that no one in the room had much faith in the employee.

Ivano chuckled and threw his arms up in surrender, then, just as he’d said, he began filing documents in trays. Just as Volf laughed along with him, another knock came at the door.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, there is a delivery waiting for you from the Adventurers’ Guild. Um, actually, he’s here already, so maybe I should send him in?” The guild employee seemed awfully nervous; Dahlia wondered if that was because of the presence of the ex-guild veteran Ivano or that of Volf of Earldom Scalfarotto.

“Please,” she said, as she took out pen and ink to sign the receipt. Volf lounged in his seat, while Ivano was bundling up the excess files that couldn’t fit in the trays and tying them with string.

“It’s very good to see you again, Chairwoman Rossetti. I apologize for visiting so late, but I have with me the forest serpent you ordered.”

When she saw the man ducking through the door, Dahlia yelped. “Mr. Augusto!” Volf, too, looked shocked, and Ivano snapped the string in his hands.

“Sorry for dropping by unannounced as well; it just so happens that I was in the area.” Augusto bore a stack of silver chests; the big smile on his face made

his brown eyes all but disappear.

Now why had the vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers' graced the room with his presence? A runner could've easily brought her materials here. Dahlia could only offer him a seat.

"Oh, Volfred, you're here too. Perfect," said Augusto as he placed one large and two small magically sealed chests on the desk. "Here is the forest serpent heart, along with the fangs and skin."

"Thank you for taking care of it for me," said the knight.

"Of course. We made sure to take extra good care of the heart." The large chest must have contained the heart of the serpent that the Beast Hunters had felled the other day.

"Isn't that great news, Dahlia? You have everything to make the bracelet now."

"Right. Thank you very much," she said. Volf seemed so excited for her, but she wasn't so confident that it would be as easy as he may have been thinking; Oswald had said that she would need at least a year if not more before she was ready, and she could just barely wield her increased magic.

Augusto explained the contents of the other boxes. "In here is a whole black slime, powdered, and in this one is the horn from a unicorn mare."

"While I did order the slime, it was through another company, but, um, I didn't order the unicorn..." She was sure the powdered black slime had been ordered through Orlando & Co., and she had no recollection of the horn at all.

"These two are on the house—a thank-you gift from Jean."

"Jean? Whatever for?" She *had* given him the compact magical stove a few days ago, but that had been an apology on behalf of the Rossetti family and it surely didn't warrant a return gift.

As she racked her brains, Augusto smiled and said, "I heard it was you who introduced Jean to Chairman Zola, and I'd like to thank you for that. It seems that Chairman Zola has helped him with a handful of matters, and Jean even addresses him as 'Professor Oswald' now." He presented her with a card

bearing an inoffensive (if generic) message of gratitude in sharp, blocky letters. What was heartwarming was that beside Jean's signature, there was a little stamped depiction of a scorpion, hinting at the delicious drink he must've had at Oswald's. "Jean now spends less time producing equally great results at a new job, and his health is on the upswing too, all thanks to Chairman Zola."

"That's so good to hear."

"The other black slime that Jean caught has been processed and shipped to Orlando & Co. already. It should be just a matter of time before it gets to you." Two black slimes at the drop of a hat? It really showed how experienced the former elite adventurer was. It would be nice to pick Jean's brain about the slimes' habitat and how to hunt them.

"Black slimes... Can't be too careful with them, even when they've been turned to powder." Volf's muttering was probably directed at someone in particular, but Dahlia ignored him for now.

"I would like to thank you personally as well, Miss Dahlia. After your introduction, Jean's wife and children came back to him. I could not be happier to hear that his family is whole once again. As his superior, I realize that I am to blame for pushing him so hard at work, but it is a relief that things have improved for him."

"Thank you very much for the sentiment, but the credit should go to Chairman Zola instead. Nonetheless, I'm very, very glad to hear that Mr. Jean has gotten better." Hearing that his family was together again genuinely made Dahlia very happy. Oswald must've given him good advice over a few drinks of scorio; that must also be why he called him "Professor" as well.

"Jean looked extremely happy too, although perhaps plagued with a sort of 'joyful fatigue.'"

Augusto's pained smile made Dahlia awfully anxious. "What? Um, is Mr. Jean okay?" What kind of fatigue could he mean? She worried whether he wasn't pushing himself too hard again for his family's sake.

"It seemed as though he had quite a few things to get off his chest, and not only has he mended the relationship with his current wife, but he mentioned that he also went to apologize to his ex-wife. Now, it turned out that his ex-wife

had remained unmarried through all these years, and in accordance with his current wife's wishes, they had a discussion amongst themselves and decided to live all together."

"He... Huh?"

"And, since they've remarried, his current wife is now his first wife, while his ex-wife has become his second wife. I'm happy they have come to such an amicable solution."

It took all of Dahlia's efforts to suppress her bewilderment. "Mm, yes, what a joyous occasion. Please send my congratulations to Mr. Jean..." Perhaps it was her commoner senses speaking, but although Dahlia felt a little guilty for being judgmental, she couldn't help thinking that Jean didn't have to learn *everything* from Oswald. Jean had fixed his relationship with his current wife—that much she understood—but he'd fixed his relationship with his ex-wife too? And they still had feelings for each other? Even so, as long as his wives—*plural*—and children were happy, then all was well that had ended well; her opinion didn't make a lick of difference anyway.

"As his now-second wife was also an elite adventurer, she and Jean went hunting for the black slimes together. He said they even had a competition to see who could get one first, but the funny thing is that they each defeated one. I was told that their son also went with them and that they happened to stumble across the unicorn, so they took the chance to slay it as well."

This time, it was Ivano's turn to mutter under his breath. "Oh, yes, just a very casual thing to do..." Unicorns were notorious for being agile and tough to handle, but that just went to show how elite the adventurers were. Dahlia supposed it was more or less the same story with the Beast Hunters and the forest serpent. *Must be a bad time to be a rare monster*, she thought briefly; Dahlia was just grateful to have her materials.

"Jean has also been transferred to a new position, and he is now head nurse for all monsters, including slimes. And instead of returning as an adventurer, his second wife made her debut in the Adventurers' Guild as Jean's assistant. That should make his job easier and hours shorter," Augusto explained. "As thanks for all that you've done for him, Jean has also asked me to take care of any

future questions or requests for monsters and materials, so please don't hesitate to come to us."

"You two are far too kind. Thank you." After a few more words between them, Dahlia, with a bit of a forced smile, sent Augusto off, leaving three people in the room.

"'Professor' sure is fitting for that man," Ivano sighed in exasperation. Oswald was more than just a professor—a sage, even; he'd repaired Jean's crumbling relationship and even reignited an old flame. Dahlia wondered where he'd gotten all his wisdom from in the first place. Then, Ivano turned his navy eyes to the black-haired youth. "Maybe you should take a few lessons too, eh, Sir Volf?"

"What? Why would I need to study under Oswald? I'm not looking for a second or a third wife, Ivano." Volf seemed incredibly offended by the suggestion, but all Ivano did in response was stare back at him.

Dahlia, always in a fret, had to come up with something to soothe the tension. "Ivano, Volf doesn't need to do that!"

"You don't think so, Ms. Dahlia?"

"Dahlia..."

"Yes, Volf could easily get ten wives if he so wanted, wouldn't you say?" Volf could do better than two or three wives; it would be a cinch for him to have twenty or even thirty women in his arms.

"Wow. Ten wives, huh? That, uh, sure is high praise, Sir Volf..."

"And yet, I can't say I'm very happy at all..." The two men laughed, but it sounded hollow.

The Hog Farm and the Giant Boar

Given that the eastern highway saw much private and freight traffic, it was no wonder that it was kept in tip-top shape. The thoroughfare was packed smooth by earth magic, formed perfectly so that rainwater drained well, wide enough so that opposing covered wagons could get past each other, and featured rest areas at regular intervals—almost exactly like the highway systems of the world that Dahlia had once known.

Today, Dahlia was riding in a fine, splendid vehicle. Drawn by twin sleipnirs, the large coach—painted black with shining silver trim—was reserved for honored guests of the Order of Beast Hunters. Whatever sort of suspension it rode on did its job extremely well. The classy interior featured a base theme in white, while the pillowy seats that Dahlia sank into were covered in gray velvet. She stared off into the passing scenery, wondering how everything had gotten to this stage.

The day before, Volf had visited her at the tower. “The new guys just finished their horseback training, and so we’ve decided to go for a ride and call it patrolling the highway. And since we’ll be out there anyway, we’re going to go to the hog farm to pick up our order of bacon and have lunch there. The captain thought you might want to join us as well,” he had said. A picnic at the hog farm to cap off equestrian training (and more importantly, it *wasn’t* an expedition), a casual affair with no dress code, and only a handful of people? *Say no more.*

Given how safe the highway was, and in combination with the protection of the Beast Hunters, there was surely no safer means of traveling. Besides, a priest capable of healing magic had also come along for this excursion—in case of food poisoning or the like—hence the deployment of the coach. And since there was room anyway, Dahlia had gratefully decided to take them up on their offer and catch a ride.

The only issue that had troubled her was what to wear. The titles of purveyor and advisor weighed heavily upon her shoulders, so she didn’t have the luxury

of dressing like a complete slob, despite the supposed lack of a dress code. It wouldn't make sense to wear anything too constricting on a farm either. After some anguishing, she had decided on an aqua blouse, a pair of navy culottes, and a coat in matching colors—just in case the weather were to take a turn for the worse.

Now, in the coach, Dahlia sat by the window, leaving a seat between her and Grato, captain of the Beast Hunters. Across from her was the older priest in a white robe and silver-embroidered stole, and beside him was Head Treasurer Gildovan Diels, dressed in a dark gray three-piece and with a pair of golden feathers pinned to his lapel. Gildo, who had switched from his inconspicuous black coach to board the Beast Hunters' coach at the castle gates, had politely greeted Dahlia and she him, but her stomach had sunk when she saw him—there truly was no such thing as a lack of a dress code.

Though everybody was engaged in small talk about the year's hot summer and whatnot, Dahlia couldn't have been less comfortable on this ride. She was still a little nervous around Captain Grato, she was meeting the high-ranking priest for the first time, and then there was Gildo, whom she had too much recent history with. Ivano wasn't there to save her either, as he had a meeting he couldn't get away from today. Meanwhile, Volf, being the Scarlet Armor that he was, led the convoy with the three rookies in tow; he had a job to do, so it wouldn't have been right to ask him to accompany her. Dahlia had no choice but to let her stomach be nervous.

"Did you like the bacon, Gildo? Goes great with wine, doesn't it?" Grato asked.

"Mm." The man with amber eyes offered little in the form of a response, but he'd most likely enjoyed the bacon very much.

"It was so good, it was to my detriment—I couldn't stop drinking!" added the priest, as he turned to Dahlia and smiled; he must've seen her looking his way. "Three days ago, when we were told that the Beast Hunters had put in a request for a priest to join them on a trip to the hog farm, all of us volunteered for this coveted assignment."

Among the priests at the temple, those with embroidered stoles occupied

administrative roles, or so Dahlia had heard. She would've expected the lower-ranking priests to concede to their superiors, or maybe that it would be dangerous for them *not* to concede, but she kept the thought to herself.

"If it was so competitive, how did you manage to get selected? Must be that new stole of yours, Aroldo?"

"Why, of course. That, and the gods' blessings granted me a victory in a decisive round of rock paper scissors," the priest said with a smug grin on his face. He had introduced himself as such to Dahlia earlier, and, surprisingly, priests who worked at the temple didn't go by their last names, as neither family background nor social status had any place before the gods.

"Good that you could enjoy the sun too, since you've been saying that you haven't had the chance to even leave the temple."

"I needed this; cooped up any longer and I would be growing mold."

Gildo cleared his throat, prompting Grato to explain himself. "Apologies, Rossetti. I should've explained that Aroldo is a relative of mine and that we have been friends since we were young."

"Yes, and Grato taught me everything bad I know, while Gildo was always there to scold us afterwards," he added. Dahlia hesitated to laugh along with him.

Gildo played his role as described. "Behave, you two. Have you forgotten that you're in the presence of Chairwoman Rossetti?" The three men truly did speak very casually with each other.

"Have you all tried giant boar bacon before?" asked Aroldo. "It's even richer and more flavorful, and absolutely on a whole different level than giant hog bacon."

"Can't say that I have. How about you, Chairwoman Rossetti?"

"No, I haven't had the opportunity either."

"Me either, and I'm afraid that we won't have the chance to try any today, as they likely don't have any in stock, since no giant boars showed up last year. And seeing how it is only summer, there may yet be time to come across them

this year..." Grato sounded almost impatient to take down a giant boar with his Ash-Hand in the fall.

"Given your luck with monsters, we should look forward to autumn," said Aroldo.

"Good point. Our order has already encountered the ruler of the woods twice." The captain was talking about the forest serpent—the last monster that travelers and couriers would like to meet. It was very uncommon for the serpents to appear, but their strength and tenacity meant there was little chance of escaping them—so Marcello, who worked in the Couriers' Guild, had said. This time, though, Dahlia felt pity for the forest serpent, but as the one who had received its heart, she had little right to say much.

"Grato, one would normally think you unfortunate for having encountered the forest serpent twice..." said Gildo. Dahlia kept silent, but she was surprised to find that for once, she was in full agreement with him.

Not long afterwards, the convoy turned off the highway and into a meadow. Waiting for them in front of a building framed with thick posts and robust beams were the beefy farmer and his farmhands.

"We are so glad to have you here, Beast Hunters!"

"Thank you for having us today. All of us here today are big fans of your smoked bacon."

"What an honor, sir!"

Thirteen knights, two mages, and one priest were visiting today. For whatever reason, the head treasurer and some magical toolmaker had also tagged along, and—much to Dahlia's discomfort—were also considered part of the Beast Hunters' party.

After a round of greetings, they were brought to a pasture area that filled every corner of the eye. As the grass swayed in the breeze, the auburn pigs napped comfortably in their pen under the sun. Though the hint was in their name, giant hogs really were gigantic—each was about the size of a cow. They would sometimes get up and move around, only to flop down and fall back

asleep immediately. It was quite the easygoing lifestyle.

“They sure are big,” said Grato, “and there are quite a few of them too.”

The farmer responded, “And they’ll be all yours soon. There are forty of them there, all females. Keep in mind that they’re already one size smaller than the males too.”

“My! They’re considered small! Do you raise males as well?” asked Dahlia.

“We’ve got three in a shed, but they’re still shoats.”

“Are they perhaps not as delicious as the females?”

“The flavor is just as good, but they can be somewhat tougher. You see, the capital prefers a tenderer cut of meat, so females are more valuable. Another reason is that males tend to fight to be the alpha, and that can get out of hand quickly.”

“Ah, just like giant boars, then?” Grato asked.

“That’s correct. They are very similar species, after all. From time to time, boars also come from the hills to the east to snatch themselves wives.”

One giant boar male led a sounder with around twenty females, and males that had lost their territory in the hills would sometimes go near human settlements in search of females and a home to call their own. The gilts, with their healthy, shiny coats, were apparently irresistible to the boars. Once every two years, the males would destroy the fencing at the farm to reach potential mates, and four years ago, they had taken away fifteen hogs with them, said the farmer. The squad sympathized with him when he said with very tired eyes that he had only *just* paid off the loans from that incident.

The conversation took place at a coarse-grained wood table, atop which was a feast and enough dark ale to match. Then, they were also brought wine and cheese. And once everything was ready, everybody raised their cups of wine and bottles of beer. Though the knights had originally intended to have lunch by themselves, Grato made the people from the farm very happy by inviting them to join, and from the private coach reserved for the Beast Hunters’ guests, he brought wine, cheese, sausage, and ham. “Even my future grandchildren will be bragging about the time I got to drink with the Beast Hunters!” Some of the

farmers even had tears welling up in their eyes, demonstrating just how beloved the knights were.

Their merry voices rang out amid the summer breeze and gentle fluttering of green grass. Grato decided they would dine buffet-style with flexible seating around the round table. Dahlia accepted an offer to sit. The dark ale she was handed wasn't quite cold, but that allowed the malts to shine through, ending in a gentle bitter note as it washed down her throat. She nibbled on some pickled cucumbers grown in the area; they were fantastically salty and sour, perfectly refreshing for the season. She then tried some pickled carrot and radish as well, which all paired very well with the drink in her hand. Apparently, the priest was a big fan as well, as he munched and crunched away beside her.

"Hey, Dahlia, there you are. Here, try some of this," Volf said, handing her a plate of pink ham. It was reassuring to finally hear his voice.

"Thank you, Volf, but feed yourself first—you must be famished from leading the convoy."

"Oh, it was nothing. We didn't want to press the newbies too hard, so we were going at a pretty relaxed pace back there." Speaking of whom, the knights dressed in unscarred armor were clinking their beer bottles. They looked to be in their late teens or just after and much more innocent than the men around them.

Then, a pair of bowls filled to the brim appeared in front of Dahlia and Volf, the steam wafting from them carrying a beautiful scent. "Volf, Ms. Dahlia, have some of this pork and vegetable soup!" Randolph was likewise placing bowls in front of the squad leaders.

"Thank you very much, Dorino. Were you at the front of the pack today as well?"

"Nah, me and Randolph were at the back letting the horses do the hard work while we enjoyed the scenery." As he laughed at his own joke, Randolph came by, and so they all put their glasses together again.

The rich white hue of the soup was made possible by the creamy giant hog broth base. Lots of thin pork slices and a good dose of salt made it hearty, and the slivered vegetables added a crisp texture to every spoonful. The sudden lack

of conversation indicated just how delicious the soup was.

Dorino separated his face from the bowl only after slurping up every last drop. “I’ve heard that giant boar males come alone but take up to twenty female hogs with ’em; is that true?”

“I have heard the same,” the shieldman said. “That would be, what, half of the hogs roaming here?”

“If that happens, we can say goodbye to the farm.” As jovial as their conversation may have been, that much was no laughing matter. “Still, a male’s gotta have a bit of charm if he’s able to bring back so many piggies with him.”

“Giant boar males are even larger than giant hogs, have tusks, and are seasoned fighters too, hence their attractiveness.”

“No shit? But providing for so many females means he’s gotta be pretty resourceful. Or maybe it’s the other way around?”

“Boar males only stay with their mates for a short period of time before going off on their own again.”

That caught Dahlia’s curiosity. “Are the giant hog females able to survive in the wilderness, then?”

“That I do not know. I have heard that the male will expand his territory if he deems it unsafe for the sounder, and that females join in the search too.”

“Well, when you’ve twenty wives to take care of...” Volf’s mumbling almost sounded like a reference to his conversation with Dahlia and Ivano the other day.

That must’ve triggered the knights at the other table, as they began getting rowdy. “How dare you, giant boars?! Make do with just ten wives, dammit!”

“Think about those of us who can’t even get one wife!”

“And to think you’d just up and disappear on them too!”

Dorino could but smile awkwardly as he brought the lads some more beer.

“Hm?” Dahlia noticed the giant hogs meandering closer and closer to the

fence opposite her, perhaps drawn in by the boisterous boys or the unfamiliar faces. Those cute round eyes staring her way made things difficult for her—it was only a matter of time before they became pork chops sizzling on camp stoves.

As she dealt with her internal turmoil, an earsplitting squeal came from what looked like a black boulder with pearly tusks charging down the hill. Its mouth was bright red and its black upturned eyes were frightening; even a giant boar piglet would be enough to send Dahlia running for her life. From behind her came a chorus of cries from the giant hog females, almost like they were a particularly shrill cheerleading section. They began rearing up and stomping their front hooves on the fence, which did little to help ease Dahlia's mind.

"Cut it out, girls. You're going to starve to death if you go up there with him," said the farmer. Almost as though his words had gotten through to them, around half of them stopped squealing immediately. But even then, their eyes remained glued to the giant boar ramming and taking down the fence.

"The boar is early this year. Perhaps it wanted to join us for lunch."

"You truly do have luck with monsters, Grato," Aroldo said.

"It appears so. Ah, Rossetti, why don't you bring its tusks home? They might make for good enchanting material." Suddenly appearing beside Dahlia was the captain, who had one red and one black longsword in his hands.

"Oh, um, thank you very much."

"He's a good size. Shall we turn half of the meat into bacon?"

"Make it two-thirds, Captain; that way, we'll look forward to going on expeditions!" said a knight. They hadn't even begun fighting the boar and they were already chatting about eating it. They almost seemed *too* relaxed.

The boar must've realized they were scheming to eat it, and it squealed in a fit of rage. Dahlia subconsciously took a step back as the men around her stepped forward.

"This should make for a good training exercise for the rookies. Back them up and don't push them too hard," ordered Grato.

“Let’s go, newbies! Show us what you’ve got, and maybe we’ll show you a slice of boar steak afterwards!”

“Aye, sir!” the boys called back in response as they charged ahead. Following some distance behind them were another handful of knights.

“Don’t let it get close to our esteemed magical toolmaker, now,” their captain warned them.

Then, the sound of a sword drawing from its sheath came from beside Dahlia. “Be back in a bit, then,” Volf said nonchalantly, as if he were simply heading out for a stroll.

Dahlia watched him walk away, but she didn’t know what to say, what she *could* say. “Um, Sir Grato, I thought giant boars were quite the dangerous monster.”

“They are rather dangerous, yes. Having the rookies around might make things a little trickier, but my men are stronger still.”

They kicked up dust and dirt as they ran in formation towards their mark. The first one to challenge the monster was a knight with a sword and brand-new armor. However, with a quick flick of its snout, the boar sent him soaring through the air. As the boy’s scream trailed farther and farther away, Volf moved at a terrifying speed and spread his arms wide. It was a good catch, and he lowered the boy to the ground, patting him twice on the shoulder after he did so.



“S-Sir Volf!” he burst out, overcome with emotion. But his savior had already turned away to pick up his dropped sword and face the beast again.

Grato provided some commentary for Dahlia. “See how the seasoned ones are taking care of the fresh recruits? An ounce of prevention is obviously best, and our masterful priest is here to provide many pounds of cure in case anything goes wrong.”

“Yes, not to worry,” replied the man, who reeked of liquor, as he bit into a skewer of pork in his right hand and then quaffed the dark ale in his left.

These two made it seem like nothing was out of the ordinary when one of the knights had nearly been sent into the stratosphere already. If he had fallen to the ground, there was little chance he would have come out of it all right. Not to mention, he could’ve died if he had been impaled or bitten by the boar! As scary scenarios played through Dahlia’s mind, a pair of knights—with the same shiny new armor—struck the monster’s flank. *Crack!* and *snap!* went their spears.

“Their hides are thick and tough, and our spears were too light. Ones double the heft would do well, but they would likely be unwieldy for newbies. Those boys need to pack on some muscle too...” mulled the captain. But it really seemed like the wrong thing to be focusing on. Now riled up, the boar turned around ninety degrees, faced those knights, and pawed at the ground.

“Dorino! Help ‘em out!”

“Gotcha!” He moved his legs and his lips—he must’ve been chanting a spell, as drops of water began to fall from his palm. He dashed right up to the boar and, with a flick of the wrist, sprayed the drops right at its snout. The boar cried out in what sounded almost like a sneeze and then froze in a daze, giving Dorino time to grab the stunned newbies by the arms and pull them to safety.

Seeing its prey slip from quite literally under its nose must have made the boar even less happy. It gouged the ground even deeper with its forelegs and squealed at the retreating knights once more before sprinting after them.

“Randolph! Shield!” barked Volf.

He readied his shield and aimed squarely at the monster. “Aye!”

There's no way he's going to stop it! Dahlia couldn't bear to watch and squeezed her eyes shut. Then immediately, *thunk!* The heavy, dull noise made her open her eyes again, but with much apprehension. The boar cried out silently as blood gushed out from its right eye. Randolph quickly backed up with his bent shield in hand; he must've bashed the boar with the edge.

"Volf!" Randolph shouted.

The black-haired youth didn't just run, he moved so quickly that it didn't even seem like his feet were even touching the ground. And then they weren't; one wondered how high his wings would take him. The boar tracked him, swinging its tusks upward in defense. Dahlia clamped her mouth shut with both hands to stop herself from screaming aloud as she prayed for his safety with all her might. Then, a flash of black streaked across the sky; evading the tusks, Volf—with his black blade—split the boar's neck wide open, its blood splattering onto the ground only after he had touched down. The giant boar growled one last time before its great body crumpled. With one arm over his head, Volf turned back and smiled; Dahlia was so glad the blood covering him wasn't his.

"Everybody, get draining and butchering, but stay on your guard—there might be a continuation!" Following their captain's command, the knights hurried towards the slain giant boar. With their limited numbers today, it would surely be no easy task to move the carcass around. "I shall join them too; good chance to teach the recruits something new. Gildo, protect Rossetti!"

"Of course."

Grato handed his friend a black longsword before joining his men. That left Dahlia with a question for Gildo. "Um, Sir Grato mentioned there might be a continuation? Will the giant boar get up and move again?"

"He meant that the boar's mates might come."

"Oh, is that right?" She wondered if they worried about their husband or if they would come seeking revenge; either way, the giant hog females sounded like they had a lot of love to give, and Dahlia felt just a little sorry for them.

"Chairwoman Rossetti, erm, it likely is not what you are thinking," Gildo said in a softer tone.

“How do you mean?”

“The giant hog females would not be here because of any concern for their mate, but in search of the male that was powerful enough to defeat their mate. The sounder is always in search of a stronger male and will even drive away ones that are too weak.”

As Dahlia felt *really* sorry for the dead giant boar, the knights began draining it of its blood, the redness of which drew her attention. Then, three dark beasts ran through the gap in the fence. “Why are they...?” They were about half the size of the giant boar earlier, but the three hogs charging straight at Dahlia were more than enough to terrify her.

“Must be because the hogs caught either the male shoats’ or the boar’s scent. Stay still, Chairwoman Rossetti.” Gildo drew his sword and stepped forward. One of the hogs fell to Grato’s sword and another was cleaved cleanly in twain by Volf. The third, the smallest and fastest, wove its way around the knights and rushed towards Gildo and Dahlia.

As small as a female may have been, it was still a *giant* hog; Dahlia was paralyzed with fear. “L-Lord Gildo!” she yelped out.

But the man in front of her didn’t seem one bit bothered. “You needn’t worry. I *am* a chivalric studies major, after all. Stone Bullet.” The pebbles, tapered to sharp points, flew from his left hand and into the eyes of the oncoming giant hog, depriving it of its sight and sense of direction. Then, he traced a large arc with his longsword; the giant hog hit the ground before it could even make a sound, and after a beat, blood came gushing from its neck. More knight than head treasurer, Gildo turned to Dahlia and smiled. “I would say I can match Grato. Wouldn’t you?”

Afterwards, all available hands were put towards bleeding and dressing the boar and hogs and, aside from that, it was a rather peaceful scene. Fortunately, none of the knights had suffered any major injuries, and when the urgent tasks were complete, everybody was back enjoying the meal again (though it was more like afternoon tea by now). Some of the meat from the wild boar had been sliced into steaks to be grilled. For some of the organs, the priest first cast his purifying magic, then the people from the farm fried them in hot oil; there

was something exciting about how rustic it was.

“Please, have this aged giant hog! This is just a bit of extra leftover from the batch we sent to the castle, but you Beast Hunters should have it!” The farmer brought a pail of the beautifully marbled pink meat.

“That should be some of the finest meat there is. Allow us—no, allow me to purchase it from you,” Grato said.

“Captain, we couldn’t and can’t defend ourselves against giant boars. Even if they only come once every few years, you saw how destructive one can be; they destroy our fences, terrify our people, carry off our livestock. Even when we’re able to call on the Order of Beast Hunters for help, it’s only after a boar shows up. This time, you’ve prevented any real damage, so I really cannot thank you all enough.”

Grato looked troubled by his kind words. “I appreciate the sentiment, but that was merely our—”

Interrupting him was Gildo. “Captain Grato, how about we gratefully accept his generosity? In return, we can offer the slaughtered boar. It would be in everybody’s best interest to have a lasting and amiable relationship, wouldn’t you say?” His sudden change into this bureaucrat-like demeanor had some of the knights looking as though they were wondering whether that was the same person as before; Dahlia took great pains to stop herself from showing her own surprise as obviously.

However, the way he turned on his head treasurer mode satisfied the farm owner. “Thank you very much for accepting it. Please enjoy the rest of your meal.” He bowed and bowed before finally taking his leave, but somehow, it felt as though both parties were closer to one another. Furthermore, the three freshly slain boars were to be turned into new, experimental flavors of bacon for the knights, who simply couldn’t wait to smack their lips in the fall.

When the farmer came by with more dark ale for Dahlia, she asked him something she had been wondering. “Do other animals besides giant boars come to your farm?”

“Regular boars come by to steal food from the hogs at night, but that can be

solved with a small dose of sleeping drugs mixed into the feed.”

“I suppose that wouldn’t work for the giant boars, though?”

“No, the giant boars don’t eat our feed in the first place and they come whenever they please, day or night. Fences work as well as you saw earlier. We usually get hit pretty bad in the fall, but I guess the seasons don’t matter this year...” Dealing with giant boars sounded like a total pain in the behind, and he seemed so tired and fed up with it. Dahlia empathized. If only they could set up electric fences; shame that there weren’t thunder crystals or the like in this world. The farmer continued, “We boil black chili powder in water and sprinkle it on the fences, which helps deter them, but it only works for so long until the smell dissipates.”

“Do boars dislike black chilies?”

“Both regular and giant ones. Splash some on their faces and they’ll turn around and run home. But the smart ones manage to avoid breaking the waterskins of the stuff, and the stubborn ones just don’t care.”

“That must be difficult...” She didn’t know whether to call the beasts passionate or brand them as stalkers.

“If it’s just a regular boar, we’ll shoot small waterskins filled with black chili juice from a bow, but they’re not that easy to hit with how nimble they are. The giant boars, though? We’re not about to get that close.” They were just regular people, so that much was only natural; the Order of Beast Hunters were the ones who were weird for treating the giant boars as walking pork chops.

Both types of boars hated black chilies, but it didn’t work if the scent dissipated. If boiling chilies in water would make it last longer, then all they had to do was— “What if you make a trap with an atomizer that sprays out chili water?” Dahlia suggested.

“Atomizer, like what you’d find in an iron or bug repellent? Wouldn’t the smell disappear really quick?”

“Not spraying the fences ahead of time, but if there’s a way to spray the boars when they get close...” Regular and giant boars moved differently, so there wasn’t a one-size-fits-all solution to the spray range. Putting the contraption

together, however, didn't seem too difficult.

"Huh. Sounds kinda hard to have those traps along the whole length of fencing, though," Dorino said.

"In that case, turn the fences into a funnel trap," Randolph suggested.

"What's that?"

"Run the fence in a valley shape so that it draws creatures in. It would be best to have done so from the beginning, but it would be fine to cut the fence and make a funnel as well. Should work if you use the new gap in the fence, line the rails with veneer, then put the funnel trap at the bottom of the valley."

"You sure that'll attract the boars?"

"Creatures, including boars, tend to dislike running into sharp corners and jumping over obstacles. Thus, they would go for the path of least resistance—the gap in the fence. To be doubly sure, at the mountains on either side of the valley, you can affix something metal—iron powder, rust, or what have you—to repel them. That should draw them into the valley."

"Damn. You're smarter than you look."

Speaking from his experience abroad, Randolph explained, "We got gray wolves, boars, monsters, and other pests along the border. Farms and ranches were easy targets. The baphomets were the most vulnerable."

"Sir Randolph, what sort of traps are employed at baphomet ranches?" asked Dahlia. The margravate might have advanced traps that she had never heard of.

"Foothold traps are most common, but clever creatures will avoid them. They are no use against packs of animals either. Therefore, they set up robust fences but leave the funneling part only wide enough for a single wolf."

"Hm? But, Randolph, wouldn't the gray wolf get through?" Dorino asked.

"Gray wolves come only at a certain time of the year, so people and their hounds lie in wait for battle. In our territory, all creatures, including gray wolves, are important resources."

"Nature's tough for a margrave, huh?" Forests ran deep and hills grew tall in the wilderness between nations. Animals and monsters thrived in those areas,

and defending ranches was a difficult task. However, a hog farm like this couldn't have knights standing by at all times.

"Though I can't guarantee that it would work, how about we give it a try? I believe I can fashion the atomizer out of a modified hot water dispenser," Dahlia said.

She meant that she'd like to give it a try *at some time in the future*, but Volf leaped out of his seat. "All right, let me grab the insect repellent vaporizer out of the wagon."

"Ms. Dahlia, I've got kraken tape and a complete set of magic crystals for ya," added Dorino.

"I have some full concentration black chili water, giant hog hide, and a spare water dispenser. Let me get all that for you right away," said the farmer.

Yes, momentum was indeed a very important part of research and development, but never before had Dahlia been dragged by the wrist into an experiment like this.

Dahlia completely disassembled the hot water dispenser to scrape off the fire crystal circuit, remove the hoses and thermal regulation parts, and generally take out anything else that was unnecessary. She knew the magical tool like the back of her hand, since it was something that she and her father had invented together. However, a closer inspection of the internals ticked her off. Whoever had built this particular example had cut corners; a few of the lines in the circuitry were imperfect, if not outright defective. Anyway, the automated atomizer was fundamentally quite simple. It used a water crystal to create water for diluting the black chili concentrate, and it vigorously expelled that solution out of a tight misting nozzle.

Dahlia had to first create a waterskin for the chili concentrate with some giant hog hide and kraken tape. Then, she had to modify the dispenser so that water from the crystal flowed to the external nozzle. While hot water dispensers were by no means inexpensive, jury-rigging it into an automated pepper spray was far cheaper than creating a case from scratch. It also was affordable to run, as the water crystal and the pepper water were only consumables that would have to be replaced at intervals after the tool was in operation.

Once everything was hooked up, Dahlia tested the functionality before assembling everything and, to the praise of everyone around her, the nozzle sprayed out a little rainbow mist.

“It’s amazing how you managed to do that in a flash! The Order of Beast Hunters truly is home to the best of the best, including your magical toolmaker!” exclaimed the farmer. Dahlia found it hard to celebrate with him, as the device had yet to prove a success.

The others chimed in with their own thoughts and opinions. “Couldn’t you put something other than black chili water in there? Maybe something like a fast-acting poison?”

“Are you serious? Any poison that *might* kill a giant boar *will* kill a human being!”

“Setting it up and maintaining the device would be a serious threat to the user’s life, and there wouldn’t be any smoked bacon for anyone anymore.”

“What about a potent soporific? It would be easy to slaughter a sleeping boar and turn it into bacon.”

“Something that could put a giant boar to sleep ought to be dangerous to humans too...”

“What about anesthetics? Paralyze it, slay it, and turn it into bacon?”

“More often than not, anesthetics are plant based, and giant boars are resistant to plant toxins. And, again, that would be dangerous for people.”

The people sitting around Dahlia offered gluttonous ideas and suggestions, which taught her that the smoked boar bacon had truly captured everyone’s hearts.

“Oh, I got it! We can make some sort of philter to tame them!”

“Dorino, who’s going to make something like that? And who’s the boar going to fall for?”

“I foresee that poor soul being crushed to death...” Randolph’s words elicited pained chuckles of agreement.

Little did they all know, though, Dorino’s suggestion was far from absurd. The

neighboring nation, known as the land of herders, had secretly begun a program employing a drug that attracted giant boar females in the hopes of capturing them and crossbreeding them with domestic giant hogs.

“Um, thank you everyone for your valuable input, but I hope to test this trap today with black chili juice.” After the successful test with water, Dahlia reassembled the parts inside the case and added extra reinforcements. She had tuned both the crystal and the nozzle to produce a thick cloud of mist. She also connected the dispenser to an external switch, itself attached to a rather large sheet of leather that would be spread on the ground, which would be activated by, say, the weight of a mature boar. The average man should also be heavy enough to trigger the trap, and Dahlia made sure to warn everybody about it. “It’s only a prototype, but the black chili water atomizer trap is now complete.”

The people around her shifted their eyes away. “I mean, I knew already, but your names are *really* on the nose...” said Volf.

“It is very straightforward, but, erm, it is awfully long...”

“You are correct, Rossetti. That is exactly what it does...”

It was such an easy-to-understand name, yet their comments suggested that it was not a great name. Why not?

“How about making it more operatic, like Diavolo Nebbianera, meaning the Devil’s Black Mist?” The name, edgier than anything Volf could come up with, came from the priest.

“It hardly rolls off the tongue,” criticized Gildo.

Grato didn’t seem to like it very much either. “Sounds like a distant cousin of the devil nettle.” Aroldo’s shoulders slumped in dejection.

“Nebelfalle.” A mumble from Randolph caught everyone’s attention.

“Ne-bel-fal-le—hey, that’s a pretty cool name!”

“Yes, it’s easy to pronounce and remember.”

“Oh, I, erm, didn’t mean to... I was just wondering how it sounded in my language—”

“It might just catch on with neighbors too!”

With the black chili water atomizer trap having been christened the nebelfalle, it was time to give it a shakedown. They mounted wooden boards on both sides of the gap in the fence, forming a U-shape with a tiny gap in the center—the trick to a funnel trap like this one. There they placed the magic tool. “Before we proceed with the test, can I have someone put in the waterskin filled with water?” Dahlia asked before she forgot to do so.

“I got it,” answered Volf.

Since they were going to test it manually, it was important they didn’t feed the trap with actual pepper water. The waterskin was attached to the exterior so that anyone could easily swap it out. With the help of the knights, Dahlia set the switch on the ground, secured it in place, and covered it with a thin layer of sand.

“All right, I’ll be the giant boar for the trial today!” Dorino said, volunteering. He deliberately moved a good distance away from the fence and then sprinted into the funnel. The activation of the Nebelfalle sprayed a very powerful drizzle that—curiously enough—carried a very spicy scent... “Gaaaaah! My eyes!”

Dahlia went pale in the face as Dorino writhed on the ground. “D-Dorino! Are you okay?!”

“Dorino, that’s water. Did it get you in the eyes?”

“That most definitely has black chili in it! Oh, gods, it burns so bad!” As he rolled around, he cupped his face with both hands and used water magic to wash out his eyes, which proved to be bright red when he finally lowered his hands. Fortunately, the priest, despite reeking of booze, had impressive healing magic and immediately cured Dorino of his ails.

Dahlia checked the magical tool to find that it indeed had the wrong waterskin mounted on it. “Why was it loaded with chili juice? I *did* say to put in the waterskin filled with water, didn’t I?” She fretted that she might have misremembered, and the first person she turned to was Volf.

“Yeah, I did like you asked and then I placed it on the waterproof cloth. After that, I helped out with the sand—”

“Forgive me, I replaced the waterskins once again afterwards,” interrupted Randolph as he tried his best to avoid looking either in the eye. It should’ve been an easily avoidable mistake, as the waterskin with the boiled-down chilies was much larger and had big words written on the side that described its contents.

Dorino’s veins bulged from his temples as a big scary grin spread across his face. “You two!” Drops of water whirled on the palm of his raised right hand, and though they were beautiful under the shining sun, the dread of what was to happen next prevented Dahlia from enjoying the sight.

“I’m sorry, Dorino! I’ll buy you drinks!” cried Volf. “Make that twice!”

“Same goes for me!” The two knights begged for mercy in a panic.

“Fine. I shall let bygones be bygones.” As Dorino sucked all of the water back into his palm, he let out a great, big sneeze—his shirt was dripping wet from when he’d washed his eyes out.

“Dorino, I would feel terrible if you caught a cold, so would you please get into dry clothes? I’ll prepare something warm for you in the meantime.”

“I’m as healthy as a horse, Ms. Dahlia. A change of clothes and a drink will fix me up just fine.” After waving goodbye to everyone, he walked to the wagon to get changed.

Dahlia then turned to the group. “Um, I owe Dorino for this too, so let me pay for his meal...”

“No, I got you—”

Randolph, once again, interrupted Volf. “A meal at the Green Tower would be more than enough.”

“It won’t be much more than commoner food, much like last time. Are you sure he wouldn’t mind?”

“If anything, he would be very happy.”

“In that case, I’ll invite you all to the tower next time.”

“It would be...”—he paused to search for the correct word—“an honor to be invited.”

Unlike Randolph, Volf wasn't smiling; in fact, he was wearing a bit of a frown. "Erm, I wouldn't want to trouble you like that."

"It's totally fine, Volf. It's not like I'm going to prepare a feast for you guys." It seemed as though he was worried about putting a burden on her, but cooking at home was infinitely cheaper—and more comfortable—than going out to eat.

"We shall bring some food and drink with us, Volf. That should make things easier on Miss Dahlia. You decide what to get."

"Oh. Sure." A wrinkle formed on Volf's brow, perhaps because he was already troubled about what kind of drink to bring to the dinner.

Before they could really wrap up the conversation, Dahlia was called away by one of the knights. The farm owner was pacing around the nebelfalle, wanting to try it out for himself. Of course, it was still loaded with the waterskin filled with chili juice, so she dashed over there before any harm would befall him. "I'll be right back!" she said as she left with Volf right on her heels.

As Randolph watched them speed away, he felt a pat on his shoulder.

"Don't push Volf too hard," said a knight with reddish blond hair who must've overheard their conversation.

"I was just hoping he would be more self aware," Randolph responded in a soft voice.

The other knight shook his head. "You know how he is. He can be as stubborn as a child. Plus, Lord Gildo stole the show today, so Volf's gotta be a little miffed, right?" Volf may have slain the boar, but Gildo had gotten the glory of protecting Dahlia. His skill with the sword was shocking for someone from the treasury department.

"I sympathize."

The other knight had joined the Beast Hunters at the same time as Volf and Randolph; they all knew each other's personalities well. However, the mischievous glint in his navy eyes was an unfamiliar sight. "I've never seen you this chatty before either, Randolph. You got a good part in the show too, didn't you, margrave?"

“I only spoke about what I thought would be pertinent from my experience.” Randolph furrowed his brow. “And the margrave is my father.”

“Hey, don’t get too worked up now.”

“I am not.”

“Well, your very accurate remarks might have come off a little pointed today is all. Volf might just not want to let others into the tower, you know?”

Randolph said nothing to agree with him and instead fired off a few words of his own. “He’ll have to mark the tower as his own territory first.”

The farmer and the farmhands sang the praises of the nebelfalle and thought it was perfect installed as is. They had high hopes for it, but a regular or a giant boar would have to visit again to prove its efficacy. Dahlia wished the best for them; it would be some time before she found out whether her idea had borne fruit, but she hoped the tool would keep the hog farm safe.

With the prototype and test run complete and some time before the sun set, Dahlia, Grato, Gildo, and a few other knights sat together around a table and continued the warm conversation. The rookies and younger farmhands at the other table began digging into their giant giant boar steaks—just looking at the abnormally thick slabs of meat was plenty filling. In front of Dahlia was a camp stove for frying up giant hog bacon and thinly sliced giant boar, and that was paired with a mountain of assorted vegetables.

“Ms. Dahlia, Volf, you’ve *got* to try some of this liver next!” said a grinning Dorino.

Dahlia could but nod silently, as she was busy gnawing on a thin slice of deep-fried giant boar heart. Though it was tough and carried a slight bitterness, its unique texture and savoriness made it a very nuanced cut of meat. It may have been her first time trying it, but it was plain to Dahlia that it was very different from regular pork heart.

Volf finished before her and so replaced her empty bottle of dark ale with a new one. “If your nebelfalle works well, you’re going to make a lot of boars sad.”

“Here’s hoping,” she said. Both regular and giant boar would in fact be crying, but mass-producing the nebelfalle would also make Ivano—who would have to set up the production line—and Fermo—who would be crafting them—bawl, as they would be up to their necks in orders, though it wasn’t something either Dahlia or Volf had any inkling of at the present time. “Oh! But that would mean we wouldn’t get any more smoked giant boar bacon.” Of course, the safety of the hog farm took precedence, but no boars also meant no bacon.

“Maybe they could notify us when they see one. Then us knights could wait at the bottom of the funnel to slay it.” Volf would have himself and his squad inside a trap if it meant getting more bacon.

“If I were the giant boar, I wouldn’t even think about coming near the farm in that case.” There may have been individual boars that would power through the pepper spray to get themselves a wife, but surely their survival was more important. There was no way a boar would go where their predators—the Order of Beast Hunters—were at the ready; if anything, they would sprint away as soon as possible.

“I don’t know. Would a male really give up that easily if he found a potential partner?” He seemed awfully sympathetic, but he was a Beast Hunter—he shouldn’t feel sorry for pests! Besides, he had *just* been talking about waiting inside the trap.

“What if you were a giant boar, Volf? Would you step into an ambush of Beast Hunters to get to your potential partner?”

“That—” The man shifted his golden eyes just once before staring straight into hers. “That might be something a man ought to do.”

Flying into the face of danger was pure foolhardiness, but Dahlia realized that must be the knight in Volf speaking. Risking one’s life to do what one must was noble—“I get it! Chivalry!”—so understood Dahlia, she declared.

“Hnk!”

“Ack!” Sitting diagonally across from her, both Gildo and Aroldo choked on their drinks and coughed with all their might.

“Are you two okay?!” Dahlia worried they had eaten or drunk something very

offensive.

“No need to worry, Rossetti.” Grato, sitting directly across from her, looked at his friends with a strained smile. “I told you not to overdo the pepper.” Grilling on the camp stove were pieces of giant boar, their grease spattering from the grate. It seemed as though the cause of their choking was too much black pepper on their meat. Gildo had recovered already, but the priest was still hunched over and his shoulders were shaking up and down.

“I wouldn’t want you to choke on the ale again, so let me go get some water for you.”

“I’ll go with you, Dahlia.”

Dahlia and Volf went off to fetch some water, and no one at the table tried to stop them.

“O Madam Toolmaker, I do not believe that is chivalry...” The soft murmur from a voice unknown dissolved gently into the raucous sounds echoing to the summer sky, never to reach the redheaded magical toolmaker nor the raven-haired knight.



Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries—Magical Lantern Decoration

“Apply it evenly with magic, and...there.” In Carlo’s hands was a dull silver plate, atop which sat a puddle of vivid red liquid—a solution made from a powdered plant from Esterland called onirosso. Controlling his magic with the tip of his finger, he spread the substance to all four edges, fully covering the rectangular plate in an even layer. It was as though the metal were clad in a beautiful layer of thin red glass that sparkled under the light—perfect for a lantern.

But in the Green Tower’s workshop, his daughter, who would soon graduate high school, creased her brows. “Well, it’s not *there*, father.”

“Hey, no need to get so frustrated. Relax, give it some steady magic, and it’ll spread into a flat layer.”

“I’ll give it another shot.” On her plate, which was a size smaller than his, Dahlia gently squeezed the onirosso from an eyedropper. However, as the liquid touched the metal, it shot in a diagonal line across the surface. “Come on! I haven’t even put my magic into it...”

Such was liquid onirosso; it moved upon contact with the tiniest amount of magic. Its vivid color made it a good dye, while its durability made it a good paint. However, it wasn’t very popular with magical toolmakers or mages. Very fine control of magic was necessary to prevent it from running everywhere or even from shooting off the surface. Blasting it with lots of magic didn’t work, but trickling a tiny amount of magic wasn’t the way to do it either. It had to be set with a fixing spell before the color faded as well. Despite that, it was often applied to furniture and arms in Esterland. Carlo wondered how they did it there; he would love to go with his daughter to see their craftspeople in action.

“Hnnng...” Dahlia yowled like a disgruntled cat as a bead of sweat dripped down from her chin, her dainty fingers trembling ever so slightly. Whenever she focused on her work, there was nothing else in her world—not fatigue, not

hunger. He knew that it was something they had in common, unfortunately.

“All right, let’s call it a night.” He straightened up the work area so that his daughter couldn’t just reach for another metal plate to try and try again.

“Father, would I be able to do this enchantment if I had more magic?” Her eyes, green just like his, stared bitterly at the metal plate. The red liquid on it wasn’t in a level layer but rather extended in lines from the center like a flower, like—dare he say—a dahlia in bloom.

“Well, it might make things a little easier. But, you know, what’s important for domestic magical tools isn’t the amount of magic you have but the control you have over it.” Again, just like him, his daughter wanted to craft magical tools for the home. Tools that required a large reserve of magic, like those for the nobility or the castle, were something they almost never dealt with.

“Father, was it hard doing the sköll enchantments at the castle? What grade do I need for large hot water dispensers?”

“Almost never” didn’t mean “never,” and he had actually done so once, which seemed to have piqued Dahlia’s interest. “About twelve. Anything less than that is difficult, so don’t you accept any jobs like that.”

“That means you have grade twelve magic? I’ll never, ever be able to do it, then...”

“If you want to get better, then make a hundred small hot water dispensers. They all dispense the same hot water anyway. Nothing inherently different about them.” He decided to suggest something different instead of teaching her how to increase her magic, which might have relieved her disappointment. It wouldn’t be right to teach her something that could damage her still-growing body, hence him not being entirely honest. Dahlia had grade eight magic. She would reach nine if she kept enchanting, but Carlo didn’t want her to go any higher than that.

The truth was he wasn’t at grade twelve magic either; even getting to eleven had been something relatively recent, and that was only because of the job at the castle that Dahlia had mentioned. Carlo had taken on a job to modify the large hot water dispensers that the royal family used, which had meant enchanting the dispensers with wind magic to prevent them from overheating.

He had rejected such offers up until that point, but he'd needed a favor—and the money as well. And honestly? It had been a mistake.

Sköll fang had been the material for that job, but Carlo hadn't managed to control its avarice for magic—despite having used mana potions to enhance his magic beyond grade eleven in preparation. Sweat had come out of every pore on his body and his breathing had become ragged. The client, in his black three-piece suit, had suggested bringing on other magical toolmakers to assist Carlo. Other well-known toolmakers were Oswald and the people within his circle, Leone—who now worked in a completely different field—and his daughter Dahlia; Carlo had only one choice. “What, and split the money with them? I must decline!” he had said, mustering the biggest laugh he could. The client had said nothing; only his thin lips had curved upward in a smile.

Completing that job had taken all the magic Carlo had thought he'd need and some more, which had had the effect of bumping his magic up closer to twelve. He had felt fortunate to make it out alive. When he finally got home that night, he'd found Dahlia waiting for him by the door. He had given her an impromptu seminar on how wind magic prevented magical tools from overheating and shown her a piece of sköll fang he had received. Her eyes had sparkled as she poked at it, and the tenderness of the gesture would have been enough to resurrect him even if he had died from the job. “It's a very difficult material, that one,” he'd warned her. “I don't want you to use it right away. Give it five or ten years, then you'll be up to it.”

She was, after all, his daughter. She must've secretly enchanted with the fang alone at night, just as he probably would have. He passed out that night, and it was too late by the time he found her pale in the face. He feared the worst, his fingers trembling in fear. The silver lining was that she was merely running low on magic, so he had her rest in bed for two days. That wasn't enough to soothe his anxiety, so he made her bread porridge with milk, a heap of sugar, and a secret splash of potion. Carlo knew damn well that she felt, as a magical toolmaker, she needed to challenge what seemed to be impossible; of course he knew, since he was the one who'd passed the trait onto her. He couldn't blame anyone but himself, and so he did nothing to reprimand her.

“Do you think you could take my son Tobias as your apprentice?” Carlo’s friend proposed that his younger son enter Carlo’s workshop next year after reaching high school and enrolling in magical toolmaking studies. However, there were a lot of considerations when it came to learning the trade, like magic capacity, magic attunement, and even what one would like to craft.

“I’ll think about it if he’s suited to make what he wants to make, *and* if it’s not just something his pops wants him to do,” Carlo replied. However, his friend was the chairman of a company that dealt in many magical tools, so there was one thing that bugged Carlo. “You gotta know a lot of noble toolmakers. Why don’t you ask them instead? Your kid would make a killing with them.”

“Tobias has the most magic of anyone in our family. Most likely, my wife’s father skipped her and passed it down to his grandkid instead...”

Ah, I get it. That’s why he asked me. His friend’s wife, much like Dahlia, had noble ancestry; you could never predict when those ties would come to wrap around your ankles like fetters. Carlo’s friend wouldn’t want to jeopardize his son’s future like that.

“Plus, I’m a merchant. I might trade tools, but what do I know about the skills or the spirit of magical toolmaking? It should be obvious that I’d turn to my *good friend*, someone who I can trust.”

“Touching, but that’s that and this is this. It’s going to cost you, you know? Say, drinks twice a month?”

“So, no change from now, then? You ought to have asked for three times, Carlo.”

The two men chased their drinks with loud cackles. It wasn’t until the date had changed that they returned home, much to the anger of their respective families.

A few days afterwards, the aforementioned son arrived at the tower. “My name is Tobias Orlando. Thank you very much for having me.”

“Carlo Rossetti. Good to have you,” he said cheerfully in response to the brown-haired boy’s very polite bow. Tobias seemed less like his father and more his mother—both in appearance and in their magical ability. “All right.

Shall we get started with magic control?”

Partially to test his aptitude, Carlo set down a metal plate and some liquid oniroso. Tobias immediately apologized for his ignorance, then asked the desired outcome and the purpose of the exercise. It was music to Carlo’s ears. *Who will use it in what way?*—those were key questions to keep at the forefront of the mind when creating magical tools for domestic use, and he was happy Tobias already understood that.

Though he had less magic than Carlo, he seemed to have some foundational knowledge, and his enchanting and shaping were crude but careful. These were trifling problems that could be fixed simply enough through practice and repetition—such was obvious to Carlo after spending just half a day’s time with Tobias. His control of magic wasn’t spectacular, but that was something Dahlia was still learning as well. Tobias also acted very much like a chairman’s son—polite, courteous, and mild—exemplified by his quiet but intense stare at his failed enchantment as sweat rolled down his brow. This bout of focus could only be one of two things: a passion for magical tools or the stubbornness of a magical toolmaker.

“Forgive me if I’m being a bother, but would it be possible for me to continue working in your workshop for just a while longer?” Tobias asked as the sun went down.

How could Carlo possibly say no? He turned the magical lantern just a little brighter. The boy pouring his heart and soul into that thin metal plate reminded Carlo so much of when he himself had been a young man.

Following his dreams, Carlo had pursued magical toolmaking in high school, but it hadn’t been long before his lack of magic had become apparent. It didn’t matter how much they had practiced; those with blue blood flowing through their veins excelled at enchantments that required much magic. In the Magical Tool Research Group—the club he had joined for the advisor—many of the members had had powerful magic as well; they had been able to easily enchant with materials that Carlo couldn’t even handle. There had been an older student there who majored in both civil service and magical tools, made many tools with his high magic capacity, and sold those tools to provide for his family.

There had also been a student of Carlo's own age who, despite somewhat lacking skills, pumped out tools and helped the family business. Compared to them, Carlo had had too little magic for the materials he wanted to work with, and he could only sit by and watch others do what he couldn't. His father may have earned his barony through his craft, but Carlo had been nowhere near his father's level.

"Be proud, Carlo. Your father's control of magic is on par with that of the gods themselves"—so said a material supplier who'd visited the Green Tower when Carlo was still a young boy. Carlo had thought those words were more or less simply flattery, but he had realized they were very much true when he entered high school and became an apprentice under his father. His father hadn't had a lot of magic, but he had had a most delicate touch. Through an opening in the housing smaller than a gimlet hole, he had been able to flow his magic like a silk thread and lay down a magical circuit inside the tool without breaking a sweat.

"Is there a trick to controlling magic well?" Carlo had asked his father. He had received three words in response, those being "practice and determination." His father and mentor was a man of few words. Carlo had wanted to improve by leaps and bounds, but all he did was grind through drills in magic control, calculations, and the like; those were certainly important skills, but he had felt as though he wasn't getting anywhere. Seeing his mates craft and enchant like it was nothing had been more than enough to make Carlo burn with envy.

The month of his sixteenth birthday—the age of majority—Carlo went out drinking to celebrate with his research club friends. There, fueled by alcohol, they did as knights did and played the confession game. A round of rock paper scissors decided who went first, and, though he no longer remembered the specific order, Carlo went last. There were stories about sleeping in on the day of the entrance exam and needing to reschedule it, and crying about how someone's childhood friend had gone and married a man he'd never heard of—stories one would expect to hear from people of their age. It was then, finally, that the toolmaking confessions came around.

"I hereby confess that I can't control my magic! Gods, I wish I could have the satisfaction of using kraken tape just once!" said an older student. Come to think of it, he had asked Carlo to apply kraken tape to a decorative bottle made

for his girlfriend. It turned out he hadn't foisted menial tasks on Carlo just because the latter was a new member of the group.

"I hereby confess that I can't release magic in a steady trickle. I've even refused good toolmaking jobs because I'd be wasting too much time trying to do so..." said another senior of Carlo's. Though the fellow was from a noble family, he had toiled away making and selling magical tools. He had even passed on odd jobs to Carlo, and it turned out that it wasn't because of tight deadlines but rather because they were jobs he couldn't do at all.

"I hereby confess that I can't stand developing tools. My old man wanted me to be an inventor because *he* didn't have the chance to be one, and so he put me through school, but all I want to do is craft them..." So that was why he enjoyed producing the same tools over and over again but hated writing papers.

By the time it was Carlo's turn, his own anxieties seemed so trivial. "Come on, Carlo," urged one of his seniors.

With his right hand on the table and his left on his glass, he took a deep breath and blurted out his secret. "I hereby confess! I only joined the Magical Tools Research Group because I had a crush on our advisor, Professor Lina!"

A few moments of silence preceded the group going absolutely wild. "Rossetti, you dog! You told everyone you joined because you wanted to get better as a toolmaker!"

"Ha ha ha! I knew it, Carlo!"

"So, *that's* why you wanted to talk about Professor Lina..."

After a few slaps on the back and a few more drinks in his system, Carlo found himself with more friends that night.

It was now so obvious that it didn't matter whether someone came from a noble or common family, whether they had much or little magic, whether they were older or younger—everyone had their fair share of troubles. From that point on, Carlo stopped complaining about his magic capacity and instead focused on perfecting his magic control. With control, technique, and information, he knew he could become a proper magical toolmaker. He knew

he could become a toolmaker like his father, who never needed to increase his magic to make perfect enchantments. In fact, he knew he could become a better toolmaker than his father one day.

Right after waking up, on his way to school, during breaks between classes, after meals, with the research club, after he got home, and until he fell asleep, he would practice and practice and practice. When he was alone, he would practice passing his magic through a hole drilled through a seal-silver-painted plate. He had to be accurate, otherwise the magic would bounce back and bite him on the finger, and that hurt like being flogged with a whip. One time, he was careless and split his fingernail wide open, and when he visited the infirmary, he lied and said he'd fallen. But that couldn't stop him; whenever he had a free moment, he would be training his magic control for no one's sake but his own.

The year after, a pretty boy of a new student with silver hair and eyes joined the Magical Tools Research Group. He was from quite the famous and wealthy viscount family, in the top five students, had good looks, and was popular with the ladies, which garnered curses from those who were envious of how the gods gave not with both but four or even five hands. But he was honest, saying that despite his background, he didn't possess much magic and couldn't craft many magical tools. It was only because his father said he would be looking for a toolmaker who could handle the production side of things to be his subordinate that he joined the club. When Carlo asked him what he had trouble with, the freshman replied that his father—though he had little magic—handled everything, like magical lanterns with enchanted effects. There wasn't much he had tried either, as his magic was lower than what the instruction manual recommended.

"You know, with good magic control, even you could make all of that stuff there," Carlo said. The freshman was shocked, but his silver eyes glimmered. Then and there, Carlo decided that he would look out for him—not because Carlo saw his old self in the kid, but because his big silver puppy eyes were just so cute.

However, teaching someone else magic control turned out to be quite difficult. Unhelpfully, Carlo said to him, "If something doesn't work, think

outside the box and try again. Repeat until it does,” but somehow it got through to the freshman. He, too, practiced until his fingernails split and his fingers bled; he aimed to have such fine control as to thread magic through a pinhole. The two of them trained with the spirit of knights, trying and trying until they could accomplish their goals. Besides, Carlo couldn’t let someone his junior get the best of him.

With four years of stubbornness, the holes in Carlo’s plates went from pen sized to gimlet sized to yarn sized. One night, while lamenting that he couldn’t get to his father’s silk-thread fineness, he fell asleep sprawled over the workbench. The next morning, his father suddenly brought him a dozen mana potions. “I’ve been waiting for you to get to this level of fine magic control,” he said, and taught Carlo how to raise his magic—a very pleasant surprise. It was no exaggeration either; Carlo’s father could indeed turn the flow of his magic from the thickness of yarn to that of a single strand of hair, then to two, four, and eight strands. His control of magic was truly impeccable, and, for the first time, the apprentice found respect for his father as his master in magical toolmaking. Even with instruction, Carlo struggled with training in the beginning, but results came quickly.

At his graduation ceremony, Carlo arranged fifty white paper roses in a line and then launched them into the air before the club advisor. After the initial shock, Professor Lina broke into the brightest, most beautiful smile he had seen yet. It was a tragedy that she was already married. When his friends found out, they reacted with a mixture of surprise and laughter and said all together, “Carlo, you devil, you!”

It was the dead of night and Carlo celebrated by his lonesome the fact that he’d gotten a new apprentice. He poured the red wine into a beaker ever so gently, praying that it wouldn’t wake his sleeping daughter. That day, he had formally accepted Tobias as his new disciple, and when Dahlia returned home, he’d introduced Tobias as his disciple and her senior. She had opened her green eyes wide, and for a split second, she’d looked at the boy with displeasure. Carlo had never thought she had such a competitive spirit dwelling in her, but she had undoubtedly reacted to the “senior” part. It was a relief for Carlo,

really. He was proud of his daughter's kindness and gentleness, but it was because of those good traits of hers that he had feared she would turn out to be a doormat. It seemed as though he needn't worry, as she not only had passion for magical tools but also the stubbornness of a magical toolmaker, just like himself and likely Tobias too. Three stubborn people together might just work better than it sounded, he reckoned. His two apprentices shone bright like rainbows after the rain. He wished for their magic to shine through forever, piercing any cloud that may overshadow them. He wished that they would always remember to help each other out in their futures making domestic magical tools. He wished, prayed even, as a man whose lack of magical capacity had hung above him like a cloud.

"My apprentices ought to learn to control magic well." *School will get you this far. The average toolmaker is this good. If you want to work in the castle, you'll need this much.* But having those references would only encourage them to set their sights on the lowest standards, and Carlo was going to teach them better than the bare minimum. He would teach them there were no limits but the ones they set for themselves. But as a master to his apprentices, he needed to give them a target, even if he wanted them to surpass every minimum. So that his apprentices would never catch up to or surpass him, he reaffirmed his determination to work on himself. Carlo—someone who'd had his father as his master—would never learn that it was a terrifying standard. Neither would his apprentices. Working on yourself simply became something that would be passed down from master to apprentice as an obvious necessity.

For the redheaded toolmaker, the results of her training began to blossom when she first put her name on her magical tools—when she was able to wear her name as a magical toolmaker with pride.





Reincarnated Female
Magical Toolmaker

Dahlia

Handsome Knight from
the Order of Beast Hunters

Volfred

Eldest Son of the
Earldom Scalfarotto

Guido

Guido's Attendant

Jonas

When Volf
snapped at him,
so did a freeze.

"GUIDO!"

"THIS IS WHAT
I ASKED HER:
'IF I WERE TO
ASK YOU TO PART
FROM VOLFE, HOW
MUCH WOULD
THAT COST?'"



"MAY I HAVE
SOME TOO?
OF THE SAGE,
I MEAN."

"HERE YOU
ARE..."

Oswald's Eldest Son

Raulaere

Bonus Translator's and Editor's Notes

[Osman/TL]

Welcome back behind the scenes! As it always does, this volume zoomed by so quickly. While Volume 5 of *Dahlia in Bloom* didn't have a big baddie or major conflict or anything like that, I feel as though we got a lot of development for supporting characters. Then again, this isn't an action-packed series but rather a slow, comfy one. We also had many views onto things happening behind Dahlia's back, which, with such a big world, I think is rather realistic. But don't worry—Volume 6 immediately throws the audience into excitement.

This time, in addition to the usual TL/ED notes, we've also cooked up something new and interactive for our faithful readers—a Q&A corner! If you've missed it, we collected questions on the official forums to answer in this section. Shakuzan and I decided to pick and answer whichever answers we wanted, so you get a peek into both of our minds. A big thank you to the readers who gave us many good questions as well as the project manager and other J-Novel Club staff going with this idea.

Speaking of which, I'd like to take the time to thank Ryoko for helping me with the white/red metaphor in the chapter "Tea Party with a Friend's Brother." Sometimes, things can be right in your face but it just won't click until you get someone to bounce ideas off of. But sometimes, like in this case, things might be obvious in a particular language or culture but not so much in another. But that's localization! The depth of the field and material make it important and valuable (not tooting my own horn)!

Anyway, thank you for sticking with us and the series, and we hope to see you again at the end of the next volume!

You've Got Questions, We've Got Answers

"What is the process to get the Italian names correctly from the Japanese

text?” asked kingpendragon.

[Osman/TL]

There’s a *lot* of internet research that goes on behind transliterating names “correctly.” I put that in quotes because these names may or may not be ones we’d find in the real world. Raulaere, who debuted in “The Magical Toolmaking Teacher,” is one that I struggled with. While the clipped version is obvious, no amount of googling came up for ラウルエーレ. At first, Rodolfo was my top choice. While it doesn’t sound anything like the source, I found on Wikipedia that this Italian name gets shortened to “Raul.” Then after polling fellow J-Novel Club localization staff members, “Raulaere” came up and I felt it had a good combination of accuracy and realism.

Continuing with this topic, **“Did you ever have to retcon the translation of a name?”** asked zwabbit.

[Osman/TL]

~~Fortunately, I haven’t needed to yet! I can’t imagine the headache of doing so. What would I do? Make an in-text explanation how a character suddenly altered their name? It wouldn’t be true to the source material and I’m pretty sure the powers that be wouldn’t like that either. However, a particular name in this volume almost asked for a retcon. Debuting in “The Hog Farm and the Giant Boar,” the priest had a name that caused a bit of deliberation. His name in Japanese is エラルド, which would’ve been perfect as “Eraldo,” but as it’s already used, I went with Aroldo!~~

Yes. Get ready for Volume 6.

Another name-related question from Ardyvee, who asks: **“What considerations go into localizing honorifics versus keeping them? What’s your personal preference when reading something translated?”**

[Osman/TL]

For *Dahlia* in particular, I wouldn't even consider using Japanese honorifics even if I were the one making the choice. The source writing does little to hide its origins—there's a lot of usage of senpai/kouhai in scenes with the Order of Beast Hunters and scenes with schoolmates and Japanese honorifics are used whenever someone is addressed. However, keeping it wouldn't do the continental setting of *Dahlia* justice. It's a localization choice that sacrifices an almost unnoticeable amount of accuracy but gives so much to the flavor of the text.

My preference in honorifics has also evolved over time. Back when I was in middle and high school, I had a strong preference for them in my fansubs. Maybe it was partially because I watched a lot of slice-of-life anime set in schools, but I felt as though there was another layer of depth with them than not. However, over time and especially after becoming a translator, I realized that it's a lot more accessible to the average person without them. You shouldn't need background knowledge of cultural intricacies which, might I add, I don't think most of the enthusiasts in the audience even have a very strong grasp of anyway.

[Shakuzan/ED]

Since I'm not a translator, I don't have a lot to add, but I thought I'd give an example, from my experience editing a different light novel for JNC, of the kinds of considerations that go into the decision to keep or omit Japanese honorifics.

Like *Dahlia in Bloom*, Itsuki Mizuho's *To Another World... with Land Mines!* has a pseudo-European setting, but one that is much more overtly inspired by JRPGs like *Dragon Quest*; that is, *Land Mines* represents a specifically Japanese fantasy of the Occident, and the characters often refer to the conventions of Japanese video games, light novels, and tabletop roleplaying. For that reason, the translator, Yen-Po Tseng, decided to keep the honorifics in, so that the characters address one another as Sarah-chan and Simon-san and so forth. In context, it works perfectly!

Let's take a departure from the previous theme. **“How does the editor/translator setup work? Do you have meetings to discuss the**

translation? Do you discuss future volumes at the same time as the current one?” asks Lily Garden.

[Osman/TL]

I really enjoy cloud-based documents for this kind of collaborative work. I’m prone to adding a lot of comments for things like explaining my translation choices, flagging potential issues, or even just making dumb jokes from time to time. These comments are also really helpful because it starts discussions with Shakuzan when I send the document over for him to edit. I’ll translate one part, get it to him to edit, then I’ll review the changes to give it my approval. While it’s a good idea to read ahead, it’s not always possible to be caught up as there may be too many volumes to do so. A good resource while translating is the Japanese *Dahlia* fan wiki, where I go to double-check things like a noble’s rank. Sorry for the disjointed sentences; I wanted to answer most of your questions!

[Shakuzan/ED]

Of all the translator-editor teams I’m a part of, Osman and I have the most active dialogue in Google Docs. Needless to say, it’s entirely businesslike; we’d *never* use comments to discuss, for instance, which characters we ship.

One thing I particularly like about JNC’s workflow is that translators have the right to veto suggested edits. (Google Docs makes this process very easy; my suggestions appear to Osman as green text with buttons for Accept and Reject.) The translator is, after all, the person who has the closest contact with the original Japanese text! From friends who work for other publishers, I’ve heard horror stories about serious errors that made it to print because an editor misinterpreted a line of dialogue and “fixed” it without ever notifying the translator.

But from my perspective as an editor, the most important advantage of this system is that anything wrong with the final product is Osman’s fault.

[Osman/TL]

(´。___。`)

ackondro asks: **“Do you maintain a character reference document to keep character information consistent?”**

[Shakuzan/ED]

Yes, every JNC series has a glossary in Google Sheets that lists the Japanese and English names of various characters, monsters, tools, etc., as well as the volume and chapter in which they first appear and a brief description. Colleagues inform me that JNC is the best in the US industry about keeping track of this kind of information and sharing it with other parties; just a couple months ago, we sent our glossary to Seven Seas, which publishes the *Dahlia* manga, in order to make certain that everyone was on the same page.

MasterLillyclaw asks: **“Is there any dialogue easier or harder to write?”**

[Osman/TL]

Scenes where many people are speaking together are the death of me. Not only is the dialogue almost never tagged, everyone also speaks rather similarly (read: realistically; *yakuwarigo* is not very prominent), so there is a lot of guesswork when trying to decipher who’s saying what. Carlo’s POV in the extra stories is also difficult. When the prose describes the past, like in flashback sequences, I find it quite the slog to get through... The sentences are usually really dense and sometimes even have in-line dialogue, which—in my opinion, at least—really doesn’t do readability any favors. In Volume 5, we also got our first taste of Jonas’s POV. It wasn’t any easier per se, but the narration felt more flavorful; there was almost a noir-like atmosphere to it with the brusque sentences and slightly edgy vocabulary.

Gastronomy! A key component to the series. Lily Garden also asks: **“With all the descriptions of food and drinks in *Dahlia*, do you guys get hungry when you are working?”**

[Osman/TL]

Goodness. Yes. So much yes. I'm the kind of person who doesn't snack so as not to spoil my dinner, which means the eating and drinking scenes really get my tummy growling! I do, however, like to join Dahlia with a dram of Islay or bourbon when I do the reading.

[Shakuzan/ED]

I get a little hungry, although I prefer not to snack while working for fear of getting food on my tablet. Most of the time, I just drink green tea.

Following up that question is another from kingpendragon, who asks: **“How often does the story mention any food or drink you have never tasted before? Does it make it harder to describe them if you haven’t? Have you ever tried any food *because* of the books?”**

[Osman/TL]

I've been blessed with an adventurous palate (the only flavor I really can't stand is licorice or ouzo) and the opportunities to try a lot of different foods, so I haven't really come across anything in *Dahlia* that's too exotic to me. While I don't think I've had crespelle (what the series calls savory crepes), fermented nectar alcohol like scarlatterba (if that's even a real thing), pheasant, or boar steak before, I'd say I can rely my past experiences to imagine how they taste. And I'm already really prone to trying food and recipes I've never tried before, so you'd best bet I'd try all those things if I had the chance to!

[Shakuzan/ED]

I haven't had the opportunity to try any of the unfamiliar foods described in *Dahlia*—I live in a landlocked state, so some of the seafood would be especially challenging to find—but volume four did inspire me to make a huge platter of gyoza that I ate while reviewing the edits from quality assurance.

“I find it disruptive when Dahlia converts local currency into yen. Is it weird to you? Have you been tempted to edit it out?” asks arghc.

[Osman/TL]

I don't get super immersed when I read *Dahlia*, probably because it's different to read for work and to read for pleasure, but I don't really have a problem with it. In fact, I usually turn those figures in yen to dollars in my head to get an even better sense of how much something is worth. It also wouldn't be fair to edit it out, as I have an obligation to keep things faithful to the source material—to a certain degree, at the very least. Again, all localization choices are trade-offs.

As if this were a job interview, strangeattractor asks: **“Tell us about a challenge in the translation that you used creativity to tackle. What is a problem you encountered? How did you solve it?”**

Spiedini

Dahlia began grilling spiedini. On skewers were chicken thigh and breast, obviously, but also heart, gizzard, cartilage, and skin—the last of these being Marcello's favorite. The accompaniments were just as important, and she had prepared two: one a condiment of salt, garlic, and scallions and the other a reduction of fish sauce, rice wine, and honey to be used as a glaze.

[Osman/TL]

If it wasn't obvious already, this was yakitori in the source! While I believe it would be fine to keep it as the Japanese dish of chicken on skewers, I figured the author is already prone to using Italian terms for dishes, like “crespelle” instead of “crepe”, so I followed suit. After taking a road trip to the States between Volumes 4 and 5, I became more aware of regional foods like the spiedie. I took that as inspiration and found its Italian origin, the spiedini.

Hypermageia

“Having more magic than one’s body can handle causes hypermageia, you see.” The symptoms of hypermageia differed from person to person, but there had been cases of shortness of breath and even cardiac arrest. On rare occasions, it occurred in the children of noble families, but Dahlia hadn’t known until now that it was caused by attempts to enhance one’s magic.

[Osman/TL]

This one I did a good bit of research for! The source had it as 魔力過多症, containing the elements of magic, excessive, and illness. You see this pattern quite frequently, like with 胃酸過多症 (gastric hyperacidity/acid reflux) and 活動過多 (hyperactivity), and that became inspiration. Following the naming conventions in English, the hyper-prefix seemed to fit just right with our fictional illness. But what about the magic element? I didn’t know if there was a correct option, but we chose to forego the Latin “magia” in favor of the Greek “mageia” as it’s “still intelligible but a little more unique,” as Shakuzan put it.

Pit/Put

“If that is what you would like to do, it’s fine by me. But instead of taking money out of your own coin purse, why not make it a business expenditure? We might not even have to spend the company’s money if we go to Mr. Augusto. Oh, and if I bring it up to Mr. Forto, I could pit them—er, put them together, and that may get things rolling quicker. How about I take care of this matter for you, chairwoman?” he asked, looking her way. Ivano’s slip of the tongue revealed there was more he had in mind.

[Osman/TL]

The pit/put line was perhaps a little enhanced from the original, where more literally, Ivano might say “I could drag them [both into this]—er, have their cooperation so that things may get rolling quicker.” His subsequent retraction also stuck out more obviously. Leaving it like that would be viable and perhaps a little more accurate to the original, but the current version makes it easier to pass off as a slip of the tongue while retaining this glimpse into the nature of

Ivano.

Lyin' Lion

“Those without businesses or titles of their own know that they would be lying to themselves if they thought they had a chance.” There were apparently standards for marriage eligibility, but they were completely foreign to Dahlia. But that phrase, the “lying” part—Dahlia shuddered. It reminded her too much of how Gildo had referred to her as a lion, and she shook it out of her head.

[Osman/TL]

Oh, I'm proud of this one! In the source material, Ivano's line literally translates to “Those without businesses or titles of their own know that we wouldn't bite, so they wouldn't even try.” It was that “bite” that reminded Dahlia of her being called a lion. However, in English, that usage of bite implies an offer laden with trickery or deceit, and that wasn't the intent of the original. *If I remove that, what reason did Dahlia think of lions, then?* I thought. I knew I had to add something back in. *Hey, lion sounds like lying...* Making these changes can be dangerous, however, as it might come into conflict in the future. Like I said above, while it helps to read ahead, the author is still writing more chapters, right? And I can't exactly read their mind either. Thankfully, I believe this won't be too disruptive if at all.

That is it for Volume 5! There were so many good questions that we couldn't get to, so perhaps we'll do this again another time? As well, I can't thank you enough for your continued support. It warms my heart every time I see a new post on the forums and Discord server about *Dahlia*, so I'll see you there. Until the next volume!

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Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools Volume 5

by Hisaya Amagishi

Translated by Osman Wong Edited by Shakuzan

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